



# Iran's Syria policy in the wake of the 'Arab Springs'

**ARTICLE IN BRIEF:** Syria is an essential element of Iranian foreign policy in the Levant. While Tehran initially appeared to welcome the opportunities presented by the 'Arab Springs,' it denounced the movement in Damascus. Iran has provided multi-dimensional assistance to the Assad regime: political, diplomatic, military and economic. This article looks at this support and its ramifications, regionally and internationally, in the search for a solution to the Syrian crisis

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Tehran paid great attention to the revolutions that spread through the Middle East from early 2011. Its official discourse aimed to take over these movements ideologically, by presenting them as the results of the "Islamic Revolution" of 1979. It even called them an "Islamic awakening wave," insisting on their Islamic character rather than on the fact that they occurred in "Arab" countries. The expression "Arab Spring" had no place in the Iranian rhetoric. Apart from this general discourse, the Iranian evaluation of the different uprisings was not uniform.<sup>1</sup> It reacted according to its own ideological and geopolitical interests, and thus backed movements opposing conservative and pro-occidental Sunni regimes -- like those in Tunisia, Bahrain and Egypt -- while denouncing violently the movement in Syria, which threatened its unique Arab ally.<sup>2</sup>

Tehran considers the alliance with Syria to be one of the greatest achievements of the past 30 years of its diplomacy, and as a particularly useful tool to secure regional influence. This major axis linking Tehran to Damascus -- and also to the Lebanese Hezbollah, and to Hamas and other Palestinian movements -- allowed Iran to achieve a strategic depth in the Levant and the Eastern Mediterranean; to spread its influence, to strengthen its position in the region and to gain more room to maneuver, especially against the West and particularly against the US. It also provided a vital instrument to secure influence in the Israel-Palestine conflict and to threaten Israel. This axis has been strengthened in the aftermath of Sept. 11, thanks to the growing influence of Tehran in western Afghanistan following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, and in Iraq, following that of Saddam Hussein and the arrival of Shiites to power in Baghdad in 2003. Mohsen Milani evoked the establishment of a genuine "corridor of resistance" linking the west of the Afghanistan (Herat) to Gaza through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon,<sup>3</sup> Damascus constituting the key supply line. Faced with the uprisings in Damascus, Tehran took them hard and over-reacted.

It's possible to distinguish -- schematically -- three moments in the rhetorical positioning of Tehran over the Syrian question until the end of the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The popular uprisings against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad were, from the very beginning, denounced as a "foreign conspiracy" provoked



by the West. The monarchies of the Gulf -- i.e., Saudi Arabia, Qatar -- were accused of favoring dissension (*fitna*) within the Muslim world. Yet, faced with the magnitude of the uprisings, the official Iranian discourse has slightly shifted. The overall silence on the massive repression in Syria has opened the way to slight criticisms, through the press in particular. President Ahmadinejad echoed this discourse in August 2011, by criticizing the drastic security solution whilst rejecting "ill-intentioned Western intervention to the interior affairs of Syria." Tehran was cautious about a possible deterioration of the situation that would jeopardize the Syrian regime. Both pragmatic and cautious, Iran sought to carve out room to maneuver by distancing itself -- at least rhetorically -- from the Damascus regime, and by making discreet contacts with certain opposition groups of Islamic orientation -- i.e., the Muslim Brotherhood, according to The Times.<sup>4</sup> However, in spring 2012, the relative weakness of the Syrian opposition in military terms, in comparison to the Assad's regime's steadfastness, led Tehran to make a stake on the preservation of the latter. Iran also reiterated its rhetoric of a policy of unconditional support and reaffirmed its "full support" to the Syrian government, which it considered to

be "spearheading the struggle against Zionism."<sup>5</sup>

According to this interpretation of events, which conformed to Damascus's version, the ongoing troubles in the country were product of Western conspiracy, backed by the Turks and the Arabs -- especially the Gulf monarchies -- in favor of the Israelis.<sup>6</sup> From Tehran's point of view, these countries were responsible for the aggravation of the Syrian crisis.<sup>7</sup> Iran ignored the scale of the uprisings, and kept silent when it came to the responsibilities of the Syrian regime and its extreme violence against its population as factors in the conflict. This position was upheld until the end of Ahmadinejad's presidency. Tehran added to this general line a particular emphasis on the Sunni jihadists in Syria, as the clashes boiled over into a genuine civil war. There was a triple objective: to discredit the Syrian opposition by assimilating them all into one particular camp, albeit initially quite a minor one; to mobilize Shiite opinion in favor of the Syrian regime by denouncing the radical anti-Shiite Sunni movements; and, finally, to stigmatize the West and its allies for their alleged support of this radical camp by invoking the danger of supporting groups that included ones close to al-Qaeda.

Photos of Iranian, Lebanese Hezbollah leaders are seen in between Iranian, Syrian, Lebanese and Hezbollah flags. May 25, 2014 PHOTO: REUTERS, ALI HASISHO



### IRANIAN INVOLVEMENT IN SYRIA: MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ASSISTANCE

Besides the rhetoric, Tehran was involved in Syria, where the civil war featured the intervention of multiple regional and international state actors, the presence of infra-state actors (rebel groups and militia of varying allegiances), and increasing tensions with neighboring countries (i.e., Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel). This civil war was coupled with an indirect conflict opposing Tehran, on the one hand, and supporting various Syrian parties, the West and Israel, as well as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar -- these last two competing with one another -- on the other. The Syrian conflict has also been a catalyst of Shia-Sunni tension in the Middle East. This "sectarian" tendency of the Syrian conflict, coupled with the increasing rivalry with the Gulf monarchies, Turkey, Israel and the West, has strengthened Tehran's will to get involved in order to back its Alawite ally and thus, impede an eventual Sunni victory, which could weaken both Iran's regional influence in the Levant and that of the Shiites in the Middle East, in contrast to the existing trend that saw their influence grow in the wake of Saddam Hussein's exit and the arrival of the Shiites in power in Baghdad. Maintaining a "friendly" regime in Damascus has thus been vital in the eyes of some decision makers in Tehran, in order to secure the Islamic Republic<sup>8</sup> and the survival of the Iranian regime.<sup>9</sup>

It is possible to distinguish two main stages of Tehran's support for Damascus. Optimistic about the Syrian regime's capacity to contain the popular protests, Tehran initially opted to offer rhetorical and moral assistance. Iran insisted on seeking a negotiated solution and Assad's remaining in power. Yet, the ongoing deterioration of the situation, and the incapability of the Syrian regime to resolve it, despite the violence of its repression, increased Iranian concerns. Coupled with the failure of the UN's mission in Syria, the support provided by some countries -- especially petro-monarchies, Turkey and the West -- and the evolution of the Middle East's context, in which Shii-Sunni tensions were strengthened and the "Arab Springs" produced no clear benefit, led Iran to get more involved at the Syrian regime's side. Iran thus became one the most active supporters of Damascus. Advocating rhetorically a "political solution among Syrians," Tehran used every means possible to help the regime's survival. As the correspondence of the Assad couple published by the Guardian in March 2012 proved, Iran offered multi-dimensional support to its ally.<sup>10</sup>



### TEHRAN PROVIDED MILITARY, AND INTELLIGENCE SUPPORT TO DAMASCUS

Although it is barely possible to measure with accuracy its extent, it is almost certain that Iran did not stop amplifying its support as the local situation worsened.

#### *Political and diplomatic support*

Iran provided political counsel and help, communicating at a high political level with the Syrian state. It offered political and diplomatic support to Assad's regime on several occasions: It organized meetings with al-Assad, supported his "reforms" or "peace plan,"<sup>11</sup> repeated that "all changes" must be undertaken under the auspices of President Assad, argued that he was the "legitimate president" of Syria until the "upcoming elections in 2014," and regularly declared its opposition to all kinds of foreign intervention in Syria.<sup>12</sup> To the concern of the international community, Iran did not hesitate to issue diffuse threats regarding possible foreign intervention in Syria.<sup>13</sup> A deterrent message was addressed to both the US and Western countries, but also to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, whom it accused of supporting -- financially and militarily -- the Syrian



## IRANIAN SUPPORT TO DAMASCUS WAS FUNDAMENTAL TO THE SURVIVAL OF THE REGIME

of the cease-fire proposed by Lakhdar Brahimi in autumn 2012.<sup>18</sup> It supported his peace plan proposed at the end of the same year; a plan that did not invoke the fate of Assad, and thus kept the door open on his continued rule -- a position against the will of the opposition, but in conformity with that of Tehran.

As a reply to the Geneva I conference (June 2012), to which it was not invited despite Russian support, Tehran proposed in July 2012 to host a meeting between the Syrian government and the "opposition."<sup>19</sup> To assert this point of view, Iran organized its own meeting on Syria in August 2012. This four-hour meeting gathered 29 states, mostly represented only by their ambassadors: Russia, China and India, but also, Cuba, Iraq, Venezuela, Afghanistan, Algeria, Pakistan and Zimbabwe.<sup>20</sup> The Western countries were absent,

as were Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the Syrian opposition. The meeting served notably as Iranian propaganda to prove that the Damascus regime was not alone. Iran also used the Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, held in Tehran, as a so-called court at which it presented its proposition of a resolution to the Syrian conflict. Iran thus tried to convince the members of the organization, a large number of which had voted -- at the UN General Assembly in August 2012 -- in favor of the text condemning the massive recourse to violence by the Syrian government (70 of 120 non-aligned countries had voted in favor of the text, versus only eight against, including Syria, Iran, China and Russia).<sup>21</sup> Whilst the so-called "Friends of Syria" met in Amman in May 2013 and the West continued to object to the participation of Iran at Geneva II, Tehran announced that it would host a new "international conference" aiming at finding a "political solution" to the conflict in Syria.<sup>22</sup> As well as assessing the importance of Iran on a diplomatic level, this also aimed to bypass the West and its Arab allies, and mobilize support behind the Syrian regime.

Iran tried to use its diplomatic heft to promote a regional solution -- with the best balance for its own interests -- to the Syrian crisis. It endeavored, unsuccessfully, to bring Ankara -- a primary regional actor who had close relations with the Syrian regime

rebels.<sup>14</sup> In the summer of 2012, Tehran objected to the instatement of a no-fly zone, which it said would stimulate a military conflict. It thus backed Damascus against international criticisms -- including those by the UN.<sup>15</sup> Iran was also the only country that condemned the suspension of Syria's membership of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in August 2012.<sup>16</sup> The sole exception to this unconditional support -- faced with international protests in May 2013 -- was the condemnation of the use of chemical weapons in Syria. Nevertheless, Iran avoided the question of whether it would give up supporting the Syrian president if the latter was found guilty of the use of such weapons.<sup>17</sup>

Tehran used every means to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis so as to maintain Assad's regime. It insisted on the centrality of the UN action in Syria, given that Damascus benefited from the protection of Russia and China against Western pressures. Iran agreed on and supported six points of the peace plan from Kofi Annan, the UN and the Arab League emissary to Syria, calling for a dialogue between the government and the opposition. Tehran hoped that using that dialogue to keep Assad in power within the framework of a political settlement would be in his favor, given the actual discrepancy between the military forces. Similarly, Tehran supported the implementation

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu holds a press conference with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.  
NOV. 1, 2013  
PHOTO: ZAMAN, MEVLUT KARABULUT



until the outbreak of the protests -- on side.<sup>23</sup> Turkish-Iranian relations had already deteriorated amid the Syrian crisis, each having taken up a position in the opposite camp. In order to promote a regional solution and extend its room for maneuver, Iran seized upon an offer from the administration of then-President of Egypt Mohamed Morsi to participate in the meeting of the quadripartite "contact group" (Egypt, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia) on Syria, created on the basis of the Egyptian proposition.<sup>24</sup> This Egyptian initiative disappeared with the ouster of Morsi in July 2012. Iran also explored the Jordanian stake. Tehran proposed that Amman serve as mediator in the Syrian crisis.<sup>25</sup> None of these diplomatic combinations could take place before the end of the presidency of Ahmadinejad.

#### *Military and security support*

Tehran provided considerable support to Damascus in terms of military, public security and intelligence services in order to increase the steadfastness of the latter on the ground. Since 2011 a large range of organizations, from the Ministry of Intelligence and Security to Iran Electronics, have helped the Syrian regime.<sup>26</sup> Trainers were sent to Damascus to advise and train the security forces in the anti-rebel struggle.<sup>27</sup> Having learnt a lot from its own experience facing the Green Movement in 2009, Tehran also supported Damascus in the cyber-war against the insurgents.<sup>28</sup> It provided means of control over phones and the Internet. The Revolutionary Guard, in particular, through its *al-Qods* unit (charged with the external affairs of the country), was quickly mobilized on the ground. Its presence was indirectly confirmed by the Iranians at the end of May 2102, when Esmail Ghani, Deputy Commander of the *al-Qods* unit affirmed in an interview with the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) that if "the Islamic Republic was not present in Syria, the massacre of the population would have been much more catastrophic."<sup>29</sup>

On July 2012, following successes by the opposition and the failure of the UN's mission, Tehran increased its military support.<sup>30</sup> The Free Syrian Army (FSA) opposition captured 48 Iranians on Syrian territory in August 2012, accusing them of being Revolutionary Guards. Tehran described them as "pilgrims" on the road to Sayyida Zeynab, the Shia sanctuary to the south

of Damascus.<sup>31</sup> Within this context, Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari, chief of the Revolutionary Guard, acknowledged for the first time the presence of *al-Qods* in Syria.<sup>32</sup> The "pilgrims" were eventually released and returned in Tehran on January 2013, confirming their links to various units of the Revolutionary Guard.<sup>33</sup> The guard's operational presence in Syria was revealed on a number of occasions -- e.g., on February 2013, upon the assassination of Gen. Hassan Shateri of the Iranian Brigade.<sup>34</sup> One might also question the size of the force deployed -- which seems relatively weak -- and the degree of their direct impact on pro-Assad forces in the military operations undertaken against the insurgents.

US experts observe that Tehran helped Damascus, which was skeptical about its own armed forces, which contained numerous Sunnis, with the military plan to form a pro-Assad militia (*Jaysh al-Sha'bi*, or National Defense Force).<sup>35</sup> This latter force, comprising upwards of 50,000 members according to some assessments, was supposed to be trained by the Revolutionary Guards and the Lebanese Hezbollah. Very active in Damascus and Aleppo, the militia would be modeled on the Iranian *basij*, according to

Mohammad Reza Naghdi, who commanded this paramilitary formation in Iran.<sup>36</sup>

Shii militants present in Syria, such as the pro-Assad *Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas* (LAFA, or Brigade al-Abbas) -- comprised of Iraqi, Syrian and Lebanese, and even Afghani and Pakistani militants -- were officially involved in the "defense" of the Sayyida Zeynab mausoleum in the south of Damascus, and were also active elsewhere in the country.<sup>37</sup> Some of the Shii Iraqi organizations close to Tehran, such as Badr, also helped the Syrian regime.<sup>38</sup> However, the principal ally of Tehran in Syria is the Hezbollah militia, with which it has had close ties since its foundation.<sup>39</sup> The latter is one the most important links in what Iran calls the "resistance axis" or "refusal front" against Israel and the US. This organization has a common vital interest in the survival of the Syrian regime.

A supporter of Damascus's rhetoric from the beginning of the crisis, Hezbollah had been thought to take responsibility for controlling the Lebanese-Syrian border against infiltrations by anti-Assad groups. It also backed Damascus in Lebanon through cooperation with the Syrian corps against

## **ROUHANI DID NOT PART WAYS WITH THE RHETORIC OF HIS PREDECESSOR ON SYRIA**



opponents of Assad taking refuge there and their Lebanese sympathizers. At the end of April 2013, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah recognized in public the direct involvement of its forces in the military operations undertaken in Syria.<sup>40</sup> Their size has yet to be measured exactly but is estimated to lie in the range 3,000 to 4,000.<sup>41</sup> While Hezbollah's support improved the military capacities of Syrian regime, in line with the objectives of Tehran, in the long run its involvement could be a disaster for the Lebanese movement, and thus for Tehran.

Finally, Iran delivered an important quantity of materials to its Syrian ally, as the interception of the vessel *Victoria* by Israeli authorities in March 2011 and the seizure of arms cargo in Turkey (in March and August 2011, and in January 2012) have proved.<sup>42</sup> Tehran also transported military equipment to Damascus using Iraqi airspace, defying the UN arms embargo.<sup>43</sup> Washington warned Baghdad on several occasions regarding the issue but proved unsuccessful.<sup>44</sup> In July 2013 the Iraqi foreign minister was forced to acknowledge that Iraq was unable to stop Iranian cargo flights to Syria.<sup>45</sup> Iranian military support to Damascus

was fundamental to the survival of the regime. In April 2013, the US Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis declared that "absent Iran's help, I don't believe Assad would have been in power the last six months."<sup>46</sup>

#### *Economic and financial support*

Tehran also tried to do its best to help Syria in terms of resisting sanctions against the regime. For example, it helped Damascus transfer its petroleum through Iraq, and vessels to ship its oil to China.<sup>47</sup> Tehran was also active in the electricity sector. In addition, it provided Damascus with its own grain supplies to feed local markets. The two countries had already concluded a free trade agreement allowing Syrian products to enter Iranian markets with a very reduced tax. However, it is in the financial domain where Tehran was the most active. Intermediaries transferred an estimated more than \$1 billion to Syria. According *The Times*, Iran spent just under \$10 billion (October 2012) supporting its Syrian ally, risking tensions between the supreme leader and the Revolutionary Guard within an already delicate economic context for the Islamic Republic.<sup>48</sup> In January 2013, the two

Former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was a staunch supporter of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.  
Aug. 31, 2013  
PHOTO: AP,  
CAROLYN KASTER



## **EVEN IF THE ROUHANI ADMINISTRATION APPEARS FLEXIBLE OVER THE NUCLEAR ISSUE, THIS IS FAR FROM THE CASE ON ITS POSITION ON SYRIA**

countries signed two credit facility agreements, according to which Iran would offer a \$1.3 billion credit line to Damascus.<sup>49</sup> In May of the same year, Syrian media announced two supplementary credit line arrangements worth up to \$4 billion.<sup>50</sup>

### **ROUHANI AND SYRIA: A NEW DEAL ?**

In the wake of his election, President Hassan Rouhani did not part ways with the rhetoric of his predecessor on Syria. During his first press conference, he underlined the legitimacy of President Assad, declared that he was against all foreign intervention in Syrian affairs -- omitting, by the way, the massive involvement of his own country -- and affirmed that the Syrian crisis must be solved by the "Syrian people."<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, Tehran kept providing multi-dimensional assistance to Damascus. At the end of July 2013, the two countries concluded another credit line agreement, which envisaged allowing Syria to buy oil products.<sup>52</sup>

The Iranian support for Damascus remained constant even when the tensions heightened at the end of summer 2013. Thus, despite serious doubts about the use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta district (August 2013), and even if Rouhani recognized the use of "chemical agents," he refused to identify the responsible party. Nevertheless, he added that, "The Islamic Republic of Iran, which was also the victim of chemical weapons [during the Iran-Iraq war], asks the international community to prevent the use of such weapons all over the world."<sup>53</sup> While this position was greeted positively by international observers, it did not change the Iranian positioning. Meanwhile, Rouhani returned to the rhetoric more typical of the Islamic Republic.<sup>54</sup> His administration accused the rebels of being responsible for this deadly attack, and warned Washington against any intervention in Syria.<sup>55</sup> Tehran also denounced the position of the Arab League for calling on the international community and the UN "to take measures against the Syrian government."<sup>56</sup>

Tehran welcomed the Russian proposition to establish



international control over the chemical weapons of Syria. The emphasis on the diplomatic solution and on the UN's role in solving the Syrian question was positive for Tehran by all means, particularly since it left the way open for further operations (and successes) by the regime, putting it in a better position in negotiations with a divided opposition, and strengthening Iran's own position.<sup>57</sup> Lastly, the US decision put stress on US-Saudi relations -- undoubtedly a collateral tactical gain for Tehran.<sup>58</sup>

Within the context of the decrease in the international tension over Syria, President Rouhani started a charm offensive against the West: In a US TV interview, he claimed that his country would never develop nuclear weapons.<sup>59</sup> Afterwards, he met the French president, and subsequently had a telephone call with US President Barack Obama -- a first since the revolution in 1979. These various gestures by Rouhani changed the international image of Iran and allowed its return to the diplomatic scene. They also raised the Western world's hopes for an improvement in relations with Tehran and drew the attention of the international community to the nuclear issue, pushing Iranian support of Syria into the background. In early October 2013, Washington



Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (L) meets with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus. Jan. 15, 2014  
PHOTO: AP / SANA

appear to be on the program of the new administration. Tehran kept consolidating its position in the country and doing its best to preserve the Assad regime as the best suitable option both on the ground and during negotiations. In this way, Iran made itself an indispensable actor in the resolution of this conflict. Rouhani emphasized the quest for a political solution to the Syrian conflict. On the diplomatic side, he made efforts for rapprochement with Ankara. The Iranian foreign minister made a visit to the Turkish capital in order to discuss the Syrian question. The increase of groups linked to al-Qaeda in Syria and the related rising Shii-Sunni sectarian conflict led these two countries to develop the prospects of getting closer, although spillover from Syria continued to separate them.<sup>66</sup>

The signature of an interim agreement on Iran's nuclear program on Nov. 24, 2013, in Geneva created a new international climate of detente, raising hopes of seeing Iran playing a more constructive role in Syria. The softening of the international climate made the creation of new diplomatic channels possible, as well as allowing more peaceful contacts between Iran and regional powers siding with the Syrian opposition. In addition -- thanks to Oman, which provided mediation between the US and Iran on the nuclear issue -- the other petro-monarchies of the Gulf (including Saudi Arabia, though reluctantly) greeted the signature of this agreement positively. Some are even considering the possibility initiating their own agreements with Tehran. The Iranian diplomacy seized the opportunity provided by this positive climate to work on relations with its neighbors in the Persian Gulf. In late November/early December 2013, the Iranian foreign minister visited four of the six countries of the Gulf -- Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Oman, excluding Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, undoubtedly not by coincidence.<sup>67</sup> During the press conference following his meeting with the Kuwait emir, the Iranian minister tried to reassure the petro-monarchies regarding the nuclear deal, and announced plans to visit to Saudi Arabia,<sup>68</sup> though the latter was not ultimately realized. This agreement was also greeted positively in Turkey, too.<sup>69</sup> Important progress having made with Ankara, the latter's position as regards the Syrian conflict has evolved, and Ankara seems set on a political settlement -- a promising point for Tehran. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu went to Iran in late November 2013.

suggested that it could accept the participation of Iran in the peace negotiations on Syria (Geneva II) only if Tehran endorsed the Geneva Communiqué calling for the establishment of a "transitional government" in the country. This proposition was immediately rejected by the Islamic Republic, which considered it a reflection of US will to topple Assad. Tehran refused any such precondition for its participation in the negotiations.<sup>60</sup> A few days later the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards reiterated Iran's "military and spiritual support to the Syrian nation and its government."<sup>61</sup>

In autumn 2013 Iran continued to quietly cooperate with the Syrian regime, consolidating its position in the country, especially in the economic domain. Tehran and Damascus discussed the prospects of developing railways between their territories via Iraq, as well as cooperation in electricity.<sup>62</sup> They also announced the launch of a joint Arabic anti-Wahhabi (an ultra-conservative branch of Islam, common in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE) TV channel.<sup>63</sup> The presence of the Revolutionary Guards in Syria was no longer an issue.<sup>64</sup> The Hezbollah leader reiterated his movement's support for Assad.<sup>65</sup> Basically, a decrease in Iranian multi-dimensional assistance did not





This visit produced a joint declaration calling for a cease-fire in Syria ahead of the Peace Conference on the Middle East (Geneva II) organized by the UN.<sup>70</sup>

The general atmosphere between Rouhani's Iran and the West, but also with some of its neighbors, seems marked by the possibility of de-escalation rather than aggravation of the confrontation. Even if this evolution could be jeopardized by unexpected events -- such as the twin attacks targeting the Iranian Embassy in Beirut on Nov. 19, 2013, which Hezbollah accused Saudi Arabia of masterminding<sup>71</sup> -- it could facilitate the quest for a solution to the Syrian conflict.

Of course there is a big discrepancy when it comes to positioning on the Syria issue. Even if the West began to consider the possibility of cooperation with Tehran in order to find a solution to the Syrian conflict<sup>72</sup> there are still huge difficulties to overcome. Given the ongoing Iranian multi-dimensional assistance to Damascus, the actors could not agree on the participation of Tehran in Geneva II, explaining why the UN secretary-general ultimately withdrew his invitation. The distrust seems appropriate, given that tying Iran's nuclear issue to cease-fire talks in Syria is of great concern to many of these players. Many are preoccupied with Iran's leveraging the nuclear issue to gain concessions from the West -- especially guaranteeing the taking into consideration of its interests in Syria, and undoubtedly in Lebanon -- to the detriment of the anti-Assad camps in particular and Sunnis in general.


For its part, even if the Rouhani administration appears flexible over the nuclear issue, this is far from the case on its position on Syria, despite a more positive rhetoric. And even if Rouhani was willing to compromise, he is not the sole decision maker in this issue. Both the supreme leader and the Revolutionary Guard must be taken into consideration -- and at present they don't seem ready to limit their support to the Assad regime.<sup>73</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Given the importance of the alliance with Syria to Tehran's interests, the Islamic Republic sided with Assad from the beginning of the uprising's outbreak. The transformation of the popular uprising into a civil war, and the rise of regional and international intervention, only strengthened the multi-dimensional support Iran provided to the Damascus government. Tehran offered all forms of assistance to enhance Syria's steadfastness and help it overcome the crisis. From this

perspective, the Islamic Republic bears some of the responsibility for the massacres committed by the Syrian army. Equally, however, it should be recognized that the countries that actively supported the insurgents were themselves engaged in a proxy war against Iran. By doing so, they hoped that the fall of its Syrian ally would mean both the weakening of the Iranian regime in particular and the Shiite movement (strengthened considerably after the fall of Hussein in Iraq) in general.

Rouhani's arrival in power only slightly modified Iranian foreign policy's positioning on the Syrian crisis. Tehran kept supporting the Damascus regime, warning the international community against all kind of military intervention and extending its influence over the country. Yet, the arrival of Rouhani softened the international atmosphere, increasing the hope for a positive evolution of the Syrian case. With the signature of the interim agreement on Iran's nuclear program on Nov. 24, 2013, progress has been made on the Iran-Syria issue. This provisional agreement could help bring Iran back to the concert of nations, a position that Iran would like to strengthen by undertaking a more moderate policy in order to secure its new status. In addition, given that the toppling of the Iranian regime is no longer on the US agenda, Tehran may show itself to be more conciliatory and helpful in its quest for a negotiated solution to the Syrian crisis. If the Islamic Republic will no longer be a part of the objective of the Syrian conflict, then it can be a part of its solution and thus contribute to the ending of this war, with its death toll in the hundreds of thousands, displaced people in the millions, and destabilizing influence across the Middle East.

Many Iranians decision makers consider Tehran's interests in Syria as vital for the country's security regime. Under these circumstances, one can hardly imagine Iran would advocate a settlement that would not take its own interests into consideration. Given the extent of its multi-dimensional support to Syria, the international community cannot ignore Iran's will. The process of rapprochement between the latter and the supporters of the Syrian opposition so as to come up with a compromise solution to the crisis will thus be long and tricky. At the time of writing, in early 2014, it remains hard to read the signs. 

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