

## Is the Iranian-Syrian Axis Lasting?

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26 July 2007

Source: [www.masrifeki.com](http://www.masrifeki.com)

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### **Allies in the “evil axis” of President Bush, Iran and Syria are however two distinctly different states. Is this strategic entente safe from change?**

In spite of their apparent rhetorical divergences and ideological contradictions<sup>1</sup>, the régimes of Damascus and Teheran show a paradoxical resemblance. Very active in foreign policy, the two states are strongly dependant on their regional environment; because of their growing isolation and the proselytizing and expansionist nature of the ideologies they embody (pan-Arab nationalism for Syria, revolutionary Islamism for Iran). Moreover, both countries have America (whose military bases proliferate in the region) as their common adversary, a fact that cements their relationship, whereas their opposition to Israel is more of an ideological character. In fact, Israel is the only collective entity in the Middle East to be both non Arab and non Moslem, and that consequently wishes to escape the hegemonic designs of these two ideological states (pan-Arabism on one hand, pan-Islamism on the other). That is why in spite of its small surface area and its minimal population, the state of Israel is a federating enemy for the two great ideological families that have dominated political life in the Middle East for a century.

Nonetheless nothing guarantees that the strategic alliance between Syria and Iran is safe from change. If the two capitals are today on the same side, they do not have the same priorities. Syria, for example, is utilizing the Lebanese crisis to open a dialogue with the United States, to recover the financial asset that Lebanon represents for Damascus and above all to maintain internal tensions in the hope of warding off the specter of the adoption of the statutes of an international tribunal that will be mandated to judge those presumed guilty of Rafic Hariri's assassination. Faced with Western pressure and Israeli threats, anxious to gain the support of the Moslem world — the overwhelming majority of which is Sunni — as a whole, because of its nuclear program, Iran is, on the contrary, desirous of calming things down in the country of the Cedar, particularly to avoid the real risks of a conflict between Sunnis and Shi'as.

In Iraq, the two states do not share an identical vision regarding the country's future. An Iraq governed by Shi'as would certainly not displease Teheran, whereas Damascus wishes to associate the Sunni minority as well as pan-Arab elements from the former Baas.

In the Palestinian territories the Iranian leaders would view unfavorably any rapprochement between Syria and the Palestinian factions favorable to dialogue with Jerusalem, since such a dialogue would imperil Teheran's alliances and undermine the prospect of Iranian hegemony over the region. As a matter of fact, for the Islamic republic Israel is a boon that allows it to claim to its advantage preponderance in the Middle East. On the other hand Syria would not fail to worry about any rapprochement between Iran and the United States over the question of Iranian nuclear development. Such an entente would doubtless reinforce the Iranian position to the point of diminishing the importance of the Syrian ally, and Damascus would at the same time lose its regional political weight. In all probability both scenarios are

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<sup>1</sup> Iran is a Persian Shi'a theocracy while Syria is a secular and pan-Arab dictatorship, led by a Sunni majority.

simultaneously probable. But which of the two régimes will save its hide first? That is the question we need to ask today.