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VLADIMIR KIRICHENKO. IRAN-SYRIA: FACTORS OF COOPERATION AND RAPPROCHEMENT // *The article was written for the bulletin “Russia and the Moslem World.”*

Keywords: Iran, Syria, cooperation, foreign policy.

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Abstract. The article is about Iran-Syria relations. Bilateral ties between these countries were not friendly under Shah Reza Pahlavi (1919-1980), despite a thaw in relations in the 1970s. Having lost the U.S. support, Iran needed allies immediately after the Islamic revolution (1978-1979), which led to a rapprochement with Syria. The Iranian leadership also shared the Syrian point of view regarding Israel. All these factors have encouraged the bilateral ties strengthening. Iran has supported Bashar al-Assad's regime, providing Syria with both financial and military assistance since the beginning of the Syrian crisis (2011).

Iran and Syria are allies in the Middle East. However, this was not always the case. The successive Syrian regimes, which have been in power since the late 1950s, were wary of Iranian politics, viewing the state as an enemy of the Arab world. Syria accused Iran of occupying the Arab lands of Khuzestan¹, which the Arabs call "Arabistan." The negative stance on this issue was also exacerbated both by the friendly policy towards Israel, pursued by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi² and the fact he was an ally of the U.S.³ Israel and Iran never had diplomatic relations, but were in good-neighborly relations after the formation of Israel for almost 30 years.

Iran opposed the partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state in resolving the Palestinian issue, while Shah Pahlavi considered it necessary to create a bi-national federal state.

Proclaimed the State of Israel in 1948, Iran recognized it de facto in March 1950. In the same year, Iran opened a consulate in this country. However, it was closed a year later, the office of the Jewish Agency for Israel⁴ and the trade mission became the official representation in Tehran.

Iran successfully combined close relations with Israel and a pro-Arab position on the Middle East settlement during this period. At the same time, the Shah of Iran Pahlavi recognized the right to exist of Israel.⁵ Political situation in Syria stabilized after Hafez al-Assad⁶ came to power in 1970. The growing influence of

Syria in Lebanon contributed to the fact that Syria became a more significant state for Iran in terms of its ties with Arab countries.⁷

Bilateral ties between Syria and Iran improved during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, as Iran provided logistical, medical and other non-military assistance to Arab countries during the conflict. Iran also provided financial assistance to Syria in the post-war period. As a result, relations between states have warmed to some extent. In 1974 Iran provided \$ 150 million in loans and a \$ 50 million grant to finance a number of industrial and agricultural projects in Syria. In 1975, Iran provided Syria with an additional \$ 300 million in loans.

In December 1975, Hafez al-Assad made a state visit to Iran for the first time. Thereafter, the countries continued to exchange ministerial visits, strengthening cultural, economic and political ties. However, in 1978, Shah Pahlavi supported the decision of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat⁸ to make peace with Israel⁹ that was unacceptable for the Syrian leadership and led to aggravation of relations between Damascus and Tehran. Interstate relations only warmed up after the Islamic revolution in Iran (1979). Syria was one of the first states to recognize the new Iranian government.

Iran-Syria General Interests

Iran lost the U.S. support and needed allies as a result of the Islamic revolution, which brought it closer to Syria. The Iranian leadership shared the concerns of the Syrian leadership regarding Israel. The hostile relationship with Iraq has also contributed to the strengthening of its ties with Syria. It is worth noting, that historically Syria has always had very tense relations with Iraq. Representatives of The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party were in power in both states. Iraq and Syria competed for ideological and political supremacy. There were also territorial conflicts between the countries. In addition, Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein¹⁰ developed hostile relations. Syria supported Iran in the Iran-Iraq

war (1980–1988). Syria also opposed the creation of an Arab coalition against Iran in November 1980. In 1982, Syria blocked the oil pipeline passing through its territory to Iraq. In 1983, Hafez al-Assad rejected the offer of the Saudi king Fahd bin Abdulaziz al-Saud¹¹ to organize a meeting with Saddam Hussein¹².

Cooperation between Iran and Syria continued with the election of Bashar al-Assad as President of Syria in 2000. Another reason for the rapprochement between Syria and Iran is their uneasy relations with Western countries, especially the U.S. These relations became most tense after the events of the early 2000s. Thus, Iran and Syria sharply criticized the invasion of US troops in Iraq in 2003, despite the negative attitude of the leaders of both countries towards the regime of Saddam Hussein.¹³

On June 16, 2006, the defense ministers of Syria and Iran signed an agreement for military cooperation between their two countries against what they called the “common threats,” presented by Israel and the U.S. Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar, Iranian Defense Minister, said that Iran considered the security of Syria as the security of Iran.¹⁴ The meeting result was the acquisition of Iranian military equipment by Syria.

In addition to selling equipment, Iran constantly invests billions of dollars in the Syrian economy, participates in the implementation of several industrial projects: the construction of cement plants, automobile assembly lines, and power plants.

On February 17, 2007, the presidents of the two countries, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Bashar al-Assad, met in Tehran and announced the creation of a coalition to fight against the United States.¹⁵ Iran has supported Bashar al-Assad's regime since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011. Tehran believed that the coming of the Syrian opposition to power would lead to the isolation of Iran in the Middle East and loss of influence in Lebanon. It would also reduce the possibility of supporting the Hezbollah organization, which Iran carried out specifically through Syria.

There were internal prerequisites for the events of the “Arab Spring” in Syria (economic, environmental and political), although there was also an external impact. The events of the “Arab Spring” in Syria had internal prerequisites (economic, environmental and political), although external intervention was provided. Saudi Arabia also provided assistance to the opposition forces to Assad. Russian researchers V. Kuzmin and N. Sokolov noted that Saudi Arabia and Iran used the situation in Syria to fight for regional leadership. Moreover, if it was beneficial for Saudi Arabia to weaken and overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad, then it was very important for Iran to strengthen and leave the current president of Syria in power¹⁶. In addition, the Saudi royal family positions itself as a defender of the Sunnis from what, in its opinion, is Iranian interference in the affairs of the Arabs. The Saudis view Iran as their rival in the region. Religious disagreements also leave their mark on relations between two countries. The fact is that the top of Saudi Arabia belongs to the extremely conservative branch of Islam – the Wahhabis. The Wahhabis are hostile to the Shiites and consider them “out of Islam.” The Wahhabis are especially intransigent towards the Alawites, the extreme Shiites who hold leading positions in Syria.

In 2013, the ministers of culture of Syria and Iran agreed to launch a joint TV channel. Then the Minister of Culture of Syria, Mohammad Abdul Sattar al-Sayed, said that their goal was to replace the channels promoting Wahhabi ideology.¹⁷ The situation in Syria was complicated by the activities of the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra terrorist groups (banned on the territory of the Russian Federation) and others. Iran is helping Syria along with Russia in the fight against extremists.

Economic cooperation between Syria and Iran

Since 2011, Iran and Syria have signed a number of agreements on military support, which also included provisions

aimed at promoting Iran's interests in the Syrian economy. It is worth noting that Syria and Iran are under economic sanctions from Western countries.

In 2011, even before the start of the Syrian crisis, Iran, Iraq and Syria signed an agreement on laying a gas pipeline from Iran to Syria through Iraq with the prospect of reaching the Mediterranean coast. Thanks to this, Iran would be able to supply gas to Europe. Israel has strongly opposed this project, as it would strengthen the positions of Iran and Hezbollah. The construction of this gas pipeline was also not in the interests of Qatar. In 2009 B. Assad refused to provide his territory for the construction of the Qatar-Turkey gas pipeline.¹⁸ With the outbreak of the war in Syria, the construction of the Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline was postponed.

In 2010, the trade turnover between Iran and Syria amounted to \$ 545 million, 516 million of which were exported from Iran to Syria, and 29 million were imported to Iran. However, due to the war in Syria, trade fell to 100 million in 2014.¹⁹ However, after the defeat of IS, the situation began to improve. In May 2020, the head of the Iranian-Syrian Joint Chamber of Commerce, Keivan Kashefi, said that Iran's trade with Syria was projected to reach \$ 1 billion by the next Iranian calendar year (from March 21, 2021).²⁰

Iran exports to Syria light oils, wheat flour, pharmaceutical additives, active yeast, milk powder, propane, urea and butane. Iran's imports from Syria include olive oil, phosphates, yarn, scrap and used batteries, fatty acids, polyurethanes, textiles and plastic products.²¹

In 2019, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, at a meeting with B. Assad in Tehran, said that his country would assist in the reconstruction of war-torn Syria.²² In June 2020, Syrian Prime Minister Hussein Arnus met with the Iranian delegation. During the event, the further development of economic cooperation between the two countries, which became the object of US and Western sanctions, was discussed.

Economic cooperation between Iran and Syria continues in accordance with the instructions of the leaders of the two countries, Arnus said. He added that Syria has a comprehensive plan for the development of agriculture and food processing in order to reduce the negative impact of the sanctions.

Hassan Danaifar, head of the headquarters for the development of Iran's economic cooperation with Iraq and Syria, who headed the Iranian delegation, for his part reiterated that his country "stands next to Syria" to resist economic sanctions.²³

Cooperation between Syria and Iran in the field of religious tourism

Iran is helping Syria to reconstruct Shiite shrines. There are several such facilities in Syria. One of them is the mazar of Sayyida Zaynab (Set Zaynab), located south of Damascus. Zaynab bint Ali²⁴, the granddaughter of the Prophet, daughter of Ali ibn Abu Talib²⁵, is buried there. Her burial site is the largest Shiite center in Syria. It hosts lectures, religious celebrations and the dissemination of religious literature. In addition, numerous Iranian tourists visit the shrine. The number of pilgrims, which was 27 thousand in 1978, increased to 202 thousand in 2003²⁶.

In the 1980s Iran and Syria have agreed to fund a pilgrimage from Iran to Syria to visit Set Zaynab, the third most important site in Shiite Islam. Syria has paid for the pilgrims' travel and accommodation, and the Iranian government allocates \$ 100 to each pilgrim to cover their expenses. By 2006, between 700 and 1,000 Iranian pilgrims were leaving for Syria every week. This is a significant drop since the 1980s, when two Boeing 747s flew roughly twice as many pilgrims to Syria each week²⁷. It should be noted that Ali Shariati,²⁸ one of the ideologists of the Islamic revolution, is buried in Set Zaynab.

Sayyida Rukaya is the second most visited Shiite shrine in Syria. This is the burial place of Rukaiya bint al-Hussein²⁹, one of the daughters of Imam Hussein³⁰. Due to the fact that it is located

in Damascus, it attracts many pilgrims. The imam of the shrine, Sheikh Nabil al-Halbawi, is one of the most famous Shiite figures in Syria.

In the early 1990s the Iranians reconstructed the tomb of Sukayna bint al-Hussein³¹, another daughter of Hussein. It is located in the Small Gate Cemetery (al-Bab al-Sagir) in Damascus. During the restoration work, a new tomb was built over the old one. The courtyard was also enlarged to accommodate more pilgrims. In addition, construction of a very large husayniyah (Shiite prayer house) was begun at the burial site³². The cemetery at Bab Sagir is also the burial place of Umm Kulthum³³, daughter of the Prophet Muhammad.

Under the Shah, the participation of Iranians in the reconstruction of religious sites in Syria was mainly an initiative of private individuals, albeit with the mediation of Iranian state institutions (for example, the embassy). An exception was the agreement on the restoration of the Set Zaynab shrine, concluded between the countries in 1973. It assumed that Iran would allocate 10 million tomans for the reconstruction of the tomb. However, the plan was realized only after the Islamic revolution of 1979³⁴.

In the east of Syria, in the city of Raqqa, there are the tombs of Amman bin Yasir³⁵ and Uwais al-Qarani³⁶. In 1988, the Iranian authorities participated in the reconstruction of these shrines³⁷.

In February 2016, the head of the Iranian Endowment and Charity Authority, Khojatoislam Ali Mohammadi, and Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halki stressed the need to expand cooperation in the field of cultural and religious tourism. During the meeting, the officials explored the possibilities for expanding bilateral ties. In particular, they discussed the development of religious tourism and simplification of procedures for Iranian pilgrims to visit holy places in Syria. Al-Halki reiterated that the cultural, intellectual and religious ties linking the two countries and their peoples contribute to the strengthening of relations between Syria and Iran³⁸.

In March 2020, the Iranian government announced a temporary suspension of tourist travel from Tehran to the religious shrines of Damascus in order to limit the spread of the coronavirus³⁹.

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Prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the relations between Syria and Iran were uneasy, even though they slightly warmed in the mid-1970s. The Syrian leadership was concerned about the ties of the Shah's Iran with Western countries and Israel. The rapprochement between Syria and Iran after the fall of the monarchy was facilitated by the common political interests of the two countries. Countries are forced to resist the spread of Wahhabi ideology and the activities of extremist organizations. In modern conditions, Syria's alliance with Iran helps it to solve not only economic, but also military tasks. In particular, Iranian instructors are organizing the training of fighters of non-governmental military units fighting on the side of Assad. For Iran, Syria is still a "corridor" to the Middle East.

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OLGA BIBIKOVA. THE ROLE OF ULAMA¹ IN THE PUBLIC LIFE IN SYRIA (1970–2020) // *The article was written for the bulletin "Russia and the Moslem World."*

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Abstract. Religion still plays a significant role in Syria, despite the fact that the civil war divided Syrians into supporters of the government and its opponents. Inside a large group of Muslim sheikhs, there is also no agreement.

During Ottoman rule in Syria (1516–1920), Istanbul did not create a hierarchy of Muslim authorities in the subordinated province. The sultans focused on the waqf administration, whose activities were limited to collection of taxes. At the end of the Ottoman period, as a result of the reforms of Tanzimat (1839–1876), Istanbul sent Sharia judges (kadi-kudat) to Syria. As for ministers of religion in Syria, they were usually the most aware and respected Muslims in fiqh². Traditionally, mufties, imams