

Iran's Syria Gamble: Losing the War, Losing the Peace?

Written by Maysam Behravesht

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MAYSAM BEHRAVESH, NOV 14 2012

With the human toll of the civil war in Syria soaring dramatically on a daily basis and a perceived shift in the government strategy from restoring opposition-captured lands to destroying them [1], the role of Iran as the only Muslim state that staunchly supports the Damascus regime is drawing greater domestic and international attention. While China and particularly Russia are thwarting Western efforts at the UN Security Council to force or even facilitate the ouster of Bashar al-Assad and thus offering him diplomatic protection at the international level, Iran is widely believed to be sustaining the Syrian government on the ground [2] in its struggle to crush the by-now-militarized Sunni-dominated rebellion, supplying it with operational intelligence and advice, logistical help as well as military equipment. What the Islamic Republic (IRI) leaders perversely continue to neglect, however, is the growing likelihood of their Syria game turning into a perilous zero-sum gamble and the profound strategic repercussions this can entail for Tehran once the doomed regime of Assad totally collapses as the violent revolt against it intensifies and military defections increase [3].

Iranian policy towards the Syrian unrest has been characterized, ever since its outbreak in March 2011, by a two-pronged strategy based, in tune with the conflict's changing nature, upon encouraging a negotiated solution on the one hand and ensuring by whatever means possible the survival of Assad regime as a vital element in the "axis of resistance" against Israel on the other [4]. The strategy originates primarily in the entrenched perception that "Syria's security is Iran's security," as Alaeddin Boroujerdi, a senior *Majlis* member close to the political camp of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, synoptically enunciated during a high-profile meeting with Bashar al-Assad in Damascus on 26 August 2012 [5]. It also speaks broadly of Tehran's long-standing attempts to project an ideological identity of itself as the spiritual and moral leader of the Muslim world, which it has been striving to mobilize against "global arrogance" and its "Zionist" embodiment in the Middle East. The dogged pursuit of this morally paradoxical and politically ambivalent policy line has, however, come at a high price particularly after peaceful demonstrations at the early stages of the uprising were radicalized into an armed insurgency against the government as a consequence of the latter's embryonic resort to brute force to terminate them.

Now about 19 months into the revolt, which has so far left over 34000 Syrians dead and hundreds of thousands displaced [6], Tehran's unswerving and apparently unconditional support for Damascus seems to have largely backfired. Not only has it failed to bolster Iranian national security and interests in the Middle East and beyond, but it has also undermined Iran's regional position and deepened its international isolation. The policy has served well to alienate the Islamist government in Ankara, which had nearly become a useful partner for Tehran, particularly helping it to broker a deal with Western powers over its disputed nuclear venture. It has further antagonized Iran's Sunni Arab rivals, stymied a meaningful resumption of diplomatic relations with post-revolutionary Egypt [7] and finally strained the limits of Iraq's willingness to allow Tehran to wield power in the country – as it is reportedly making desperate use of Iraqi territory to assist the Syrian government [8]. Moreover and perhaps most significantly, the policy has played an underlying part in eliciting harsher sanctions by the West against the IRI's controversial atomic programme [9], and is likely convincing leaders in the United States and Europe that the current Iranian leadership may not be trusted with the bomb, nor even perhaps with a "breakout capability."

Yet, material security, as highlighted by Boroujerdi and a number of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commanders, does not definitely constitute the sole component of what is at stake for Iran in Syria and the consequences of its unmeasured approach to the crisis in the Arab nation. Tehran has also had its revolutionary

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image stained in the region by an unmistakable display of double standards vis-à-vis the popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa and is rapidly losing what has been left of its popularity with certain segments of the Arab street including Palestinians [10], an affinity Iranian leaders have long invested upon and taken more costly pains over the past few years to build by showing radical opposition to Israel. Following gross and systematic abuses of human rights, including a number of massacres, organized use of violence against civilians and enforced abductions [11], mostly perpetrated by the militia and military forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad, it can now be safely argued that the tipping point of uprising has long passed in disfavour of the pre-Arab Spring status quo and there will be no return whatsoever of business as usual in Syria as Iran favours and strives to bring about. Iranian statesmen are tragically mistaken if they find themselves disposed to think otherwise [12].

The wishful belief in Assad's Pyrrhic victory over the rebels, prevailing as it appears to be in many conservative decision-making quarters in Tehran, has never been more untenable with the already deepened Jihadization of conflict inside Syria and its meaningful accompaniment by a renewed Western endeavour to merge non-extremist opposition groups into an effective united front against the embattled regime [13]. Iranian leaders need accustom themselves to the bare reality that at any event their Alawite ally is destined to go.

To put it in a nutshell, Iran's *Syrian syndrome*, so to speak, is unsettling and negating it materially and perceptually on the domestic, regional and international levels [14]. And eventually, if Syrians manage, in their quest for democracy and dignity, to find a way out of their current predicament and build a free future of their own, it will almost undoubtedly be one without Assad and his cohort [15], most probably rendering Iran the great loser both of the war now and of the peace then. Indeed, how to engage in the Syrian conflict is among many crucial matters the Islamic Republic should fundamentally rethink and devise reasonable policy responses to if it really aspires to stay strategically afloat in the region.

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