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SYRIA AND IRAN

*Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics
in the Middle East*

Jubin M. Goodarzi

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In memory of my father, Mohsen Goodarzi,
patriot, diplomat, and above all, humanist.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ABC	American Broadcasting Corporation
ACC	Arab Cooperation Council
ADP	Arab Democratic Party
AFP	Agence France-Presse
AMU	Arab Maghreb Union
AWACS	Airborne Warning and Control System
CAIS	Centre for Arab and Iranian Studies
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DFLP	Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine
DPA	<i>Deutsche Presse Agentur</i>
EC	European Community
EW	electronic warfare
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	gross domestic product
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ICP	Iraqi Communist Party
IDF	Israeli Defence Forces
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
INA	Iraqi News Agency
IPC	Iraq Petroleum Company
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
IRNA	Islamic Republic News Agency (formerly Pars Agency)
IRP	Islamic Republican Party
IUF	Islamic Unification Front
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
LCP	Lebanese Communist Party
MNF	Multinational Force
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NIE	<i>National Intelligence Estimate</i>
NSA	National Security Agency
OIC	Organization of the Islamic Conference

OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PBS	Public Broadcasting Service
PLA	Palestinian Liberation Army
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PNSF	Palestinian National Salvation Front
POW	prisoner of war
PSP	Progressive Socialist Party
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
RASD	<i>Republica Arabe Saharaui Democratica</i> (Saharan Arab Democratic Republic)
SAM	surface-to-air missile
SANA	Syrian Arab News Agency
SAVAK	<i>Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar</i> (Shah's secret police)
SDC	Supreme Defence Council
SEAL	SEa, Air and Land
SLA	South Lebanon Army
SSNP	Syrian Social Nationalist Party
SWB	Summary of World Broadcasts
TWA	Trans World Airlines
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAR	United Arab Republic
UKP	United Kurdish Party
UNIFIL	United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
USAID	US Agency for International Development
USS	United States Ship
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Preface to the Paperback Edition

Since the initial publication of *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* in spring 2006, there has been a great deal of interest and renewed focus on the longstanding relationship between these two key Middle Eastern states. The 34-day Lebanon conflict in the summer of 2006, the controversy over Iran's nuclear programme, Israel's bombardment of an alleged Syrian nuclear facility in September 2007, and heightened cooperation between Damascus and Tehran all highlight the importance of these two actors and their close links.

Given the regional situation, it continues to be imperative, as in the past, to understand the history and evolution of relations between Syria and Iran. Generally speaking, there are three important reasons why the nexus between the two deserves attention. First, their alliance has had a significant impact on Middle East politics since 1979. Second, it has proven to be an enduring relationship that has now lasted 30 years, which is extraordinary when one takes into account the volatility of the Middle East and its shifting political sands. Third, in certain respects many regional and political observers still misunderstand the alliance.

From the outset, three decades ago, the two alliance partners were noticeably successful in frustrating Iraqi, Israeli and US designs and policies in the Middle East. Even in the post-cold war period, with the United States dominating the regional and world stage, with both countries subjected to economic sanctions and with the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, Syria and Iran have been able to wield a considerable amount of power and influence in the Middle East, especially in Iraq, Lebanon and – directly and indirectly – on the world oil markets.

Ba'thist Syria and Islamist Iran are, one should note, both staunchly independent states. Therefore, it is essential to understand their three major foreign policy priorities. The first core priority for both the Syrian Ba'thist and Iranian Islamist governments is, of course, in view of their authoritarian nature, regime survival. The second is national security, meaning the maintenance of the territorial integrity and independence of each of their respective countries. Syria's two main policy objectives

in terms of national security are (a) to regain the Golan Heights occupied by Israel since 1967 and (b) to have (at the very least) the power of veto over Lebanese affairs to ensure that the government in Beirut does not adopt policies that are detrimental to the interests of Damascus. Iran's two major national security objectives are (a) to be the primary regional player in Persian Gulf affairs and (b) to guard against the eventual emergence in Baghdad of a government that is hostile to Tehran. The third core priority is to protect and promote what Damascus sees as Arab interests, and Tehran sees as Islamic interests, in the region.

The alliance between Damascus and Tehran has been an enduring feature of the political landscape of the Middle East since 1979, and has undergone significant changes since its inception. Overall, one can discern six distinct stages in the evolution of the alliance:

- ❑ The emergence of the Syrian–Iranian alliance, 1979–82;
- ❑ the achievements and limits of Syrian–Iranian power, 1982–85;
- ❑ intra-alliance tensions and consolidation of the axis, 1985–88;
- ❑ the containment of Saddam's Iraq in the Levant and Gulf, 1988–91;
- ❑ the continuation of alliance cooperation in the post-cold war era, 1991–2003; and
- ❑ the reinvigoration of the alliance since the 2003 Iraq war.

In this book I cover the first three of the above phases extensively, and give a general overview of the latter three. (The reason for this bias is that the first three stages are more important, for they constituted the formative years of the alliance, so consolidated the relationship.) If one understands the period between 1979 and 1988 well, particularly the phase between 1985 and 1988, one can then more easily comprehend and decipher how the partnership has evolved since then, despite radical changes and transformations having taken place both in the region and internationally.

In terms of the shifting balance of power and the evolution of the power structure in the Syrian–Iranian alliance, much has changed since its emergence three decades ago (see chart). During the 1980s, Syria was the dominant partner, whereas now Iran enjoys a more influential position. For 29 years (from 1976 to 2005) Syria was the more prominent player in Lebanon because, quite apart from its proximity, it maintained a sizeable military presence in that country. However, since Syria's military withdrawal in 2005 and the pro-Iranian Hezbollah playing a more prominent role in Lebanese politics, this is no longer the case. In

addition, Egypt's banishment from the Arab fold after the 1979 Camp David Accords and Iraq's entanglement in a conflict with Iran had raised Syria's importance in Arab and regional politics during the 1980s. Furthermore, while both countries had poor relations with the USA, Syria, unlike Iran, enjoyed political, military and economic backing from the Soviet Union until the late 1980s when bilateral relations cooled markedly under Mikhail Gorbachev. During the Iran–Iraq conflict, Syria served as a conduit for arms shipments to Iran from both the East and the West. Iran's dependency became particularly great after the deterioration of relations with Moscow in 1982 and Washington's efforts to impose a worldwide arms embargo on Iran from 1983 onwards.

Since, as we all know, necessity is the mother of invention, Iran began to develop its own arms industry in the 1980s and by the 1990s was already playing the leading role in joint efforts with Syria to develop ballistic missiles. Today, Iran exports arms to Syria and, moreover, finances Syrian arms purchases from Russia, Belarus, North Korea and other states. During the 1980s, Iran needed its alliance with Syria to avoid becoming isolated in the Middle East and to dispel pro-Iraqi propaganda that the Iran–Iraq war was an Arab–Iranian conflict. Following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Tehran mended fences with many Arab countries, including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Morocco and Mauritania to name a few. Today, despite its uneasy relations with a number of key Arab governments, Iran enjoys widespread popularity among the Arab masses. In recent years, its political posturing on the nuclear issue, relatively high oil prices on international markets, and the commitment of US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan (where Iran can make the situation even more problematic for Washington and its allies) have enhanced Tehran's power and prestige.

During the first two decades of its existence, scholars and observers frequently wrote off the Damascus–Tehran partnership as a short-term, opportunistic coalition against Saddam Hussein. Since the Iraqi dictator was toppled in 2003 and the partnership still holds firm, that analysis was obviously too simplistic; we need a more nuanced and sophisticated approach to the overall equation and the various reasons why Syria and Iran came together are discussed at length in the book. The cooperation between the two regimes has also been attributed to the Syrian leadership being Alawite and Iran's clerical regime being Shiite, but this argument fails to stand up to close scrutiny. The Syrian regime is secular and its relationship with Tehran is based on common political, economic and strategic concerns. Furthermore, just as many orthodox Sunni Muslims refuse to consider Shiites true Muslims, there are those in

Shiite Islam who do not consider Alawites true Muslims. Over the years, one has heard various arguments like, for example, Hafez Assad did not visit Iran while Ayatollah Khomeini was alive because the latter did not consider the Syrian leader a true Muslim. In my view, the religious element has not been a determining factor and has had little if any salience. The last misconception is the belief that Iran bought Syrian fealty during the 1980s with free oil shipments to Syria. I deal with that issue extensively in the chapter covering the period between 1985 and 1988, and again the conclusion is that this argument is false.

One major event to have taken place since the initial publication of this book has been the conflict in Lebanon in the summer of 2006. However, irrespective of whether either or both sides planned the war, one thing is certain: once the hostilities started, the USA found it expedient to delay a speedy end to the conflict in the UN Security Council for more than a month, calculating that a sustained Israeli ground, sea and air assault on Lebanon lasting several weeks would weaken and, it was hoped, destroy Hezbollah, thereby denying the Syrian–Iranian camp a major trump card in the regional power struggle against Washington and Tel Aviv. From a US perspective, the destruction of Hezbollah would have paved the way for possible military action against Iran in the event of the dispute over Tehran's nuclear programme not being resolved politically on terms Washington found advantageous and favourable. The reason for this is that potential Hezbollah retaliation against Israel serves as a trip wire for US military action against Iran and Syria. It is noteworthy that in a premature but telling statement during the conflict, US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice confidently asserted, 'we are witnessing the birth pangs of a new Middle East.'

Although Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah claimed victory in the conflict, in the greater scheme of things it was not so much that Hezbollah won but that Israel lost. Israel had set high benchmarks for victory, which included the release of the two captured Israeli soldiers (Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev) and the annihilation of Hezbollah, so it fell short of its stated objectives. Hezbollah was weakened, but at the same time showed enormous resourcefulness and resilience during the fighting – particularly in the realm of electronic warfare (EW) – and with its recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts in the immediate aftermath of the conflict. I should emphasize that immediately after the month-long war Hezbollah gained enormous popularity and support among the masses in the Arab-Muslim world. More recently, in July 2008, Hezbollah won a major symbolic victory when it exchanged

the bodies of the two Israeli servicemen for five Lebanese prisoners, most notably Samir Qantar, and the remains of 199 others. In addition, two months earlier, in May 2008, the Doha agreement, which ended an 18-month-long political deadlock in Lebanon, marked a significant gain for the pro-Syrian Hezbollah-led camp. As a result of the accord, the Hezbollah-led opposition secured 11 cabinet posts, which would enable it to veto any cabinet decisions, something it had been demanding all along.

Looking at more recent events, it seems improbable that there will be a shift in US policy towards Syria and Iran, or at least until the new US administration assumes office in January 2009. Although the chances of a military strike on Iran decreased markedly with the publication of the US *National Intelligence Estimate* (NIE) on Iran's nuclear activities in December 2007 (which concluded that Tehran abandoned its nuclear weapons programme in 2003), tensions remain high. One cannot rule out the prospect of at least aerial strikes on Iran. At the same time, despite the Annapolis conference in November 2007, the likelihood of major advances on the Palestinian–Israeli track of the Middle East peace process seems remote. It also remains to be seen whether Turkey's quiet diplomacy and mediation between Damascus and Tel Aviv will eventually bear fruit.

Overall, Israel's failure to deliver a *coup de grâce* against the Syrian and Iranian-backed Hezbollah movement in the 2006 Lebanon war, the absence of any major progress in the Arab–Israeli peace process, Washington's preoccupation with the Iraqi and Afghan imbroglios, and the volatility in the international oil markets have magnified Syrian–Iranian influence and diminished Washington's room for manoeuvre in the Middle East. However, this does not mean that the Syrian–Iranian axis is on the ascendant again. Although both countries are defiant, they are also on the defensive. Much depends on how the situation in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon evolves, and on the policies of the new US administration. In general, recent developments have diminished the prospect of a full-scale conflict between the two camps and have strengthened elements on both sides who advocate dialogue and negotiations to resolve differences. For the foreseeable future, Syria and Iran will probably continue and perhaps intensify their cooperation in view of the regional situation and the challenges that may lie ahead.

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Geneva, Switzerland
November 2008

The Evolution of the Power Structure in the Syrian–Iranian Alliance (1979 to Present)

1980s <i>Syria – The Dominant Partner due to:</i>	1990s <i>Transition</i>	2000s <i>Iran – The Dominant Partner due to:</i>
<p>Syrian military presence in Lebanon (since 1976)</p> <p>Syria's political prominence due to Egypt's banishment from the Arab fold (1979–87) and Iraq's entanglement in the Gulf War (1980–88)</p> <p>Soviet political, military and economic support for Syria</p> <p>Syria conduit for arms shipments to Iran</p> <p>Arms embargo on Iran (US-led Operation Staunch since 1983)</p> <p>Iranian oil shipments to Syria (1982–1989)*</p> <p>Iran at war with Iraq (1980–88)</p> <p>Iran's isolation in the Arab world, alliance with Syria to dispel Arab–Iranian rift</p>	<p>Collapse of the Soviet Union (1991)</p> <p>Development of indigenous Iranian arms industry</p> <p>Iran mends fences with many Arab states after eruption of Kuwait crisis</p>	<p>Syrian military withdrawal from Lebanon (2005)</p> <p>Iran finances Syria's foreign arms purchases</p> <p>Iranian military exports to Syria</p> <p>Iran's political posturing on the nuclear issue (2003–present)</p> <p>Prominence of pro-Iranian Hezbollah on Lebanese political scene (since 2000 and 2005)</p> <p>USA overstretched in Iraq and Afghanistan (Iran's neighbours)</p> <p>Iran reaping political and economic advantages of high oil prices</p>

* 'The more important the recipient is to the donor, the more aid it is likely to receive, but the less leverage such aid will produce.' Stephen Walt, *Origins of Alliances*, Cornell University Press, 1987.

Introduction

Alliances are central to any analysis of Middle East politics. Tribes, clans and small communities have found security in them since the dawn of civilization. Indeed, for thousands of years, since the ancient empires of the Egyptians, Hittites, Assyrians and Persians, alliances have been a common feature on the Middle East's political landscape.¹ Recurrent struggles between various regional, and later extra-regional, powers like the Greeks, Romans and Mongols determined the course of Middle East history for more than two millennia until the rise of modern nation-states in the region during the early half of the twentieth century.

In the decades just before and after the Second World War, the rise of modern nationalism in the region, the gradual retreat of Britain and France and the onset of the cold war ushered in a period of intense political and ideological rivalry among the various radical and conservative states in the Middle East. The newly-created state of Israel's defeat of the Arabs in the 1948 Palestine War, the appeal of radical Arab nationalism, and archaic political systems exacerbated and polarized the situation. Also, the region's vast oil reserves and geopolitical importance – at the crossroads between Europe, Africa, Asia and the Indian subcontinent – increased the Middle East's significance to the superpowers and led to continued outside interference in the area. Concomitantly, in jockeying for influence and aid to boost their own regional and international power and position, many regional actors wanted to exploit the bipolar system by cultivating close ties with either Washington or Moscow. Others tried to enhance their security by forging alliances with regional actors that wanted to minimize the foreign presence in the Middle East. The volatile and precarious conditions in the region led to the formation of many short-lived alliances.

In a landmark study on alliance theory and alliance formation in the Middle East, Walt identified 33 different alliances in the region from 1955 to 1979 alone.² The general trend has been for regional actors to form alliances to diminish a threat posed by another regional power or alliance. They will overcome their ideological differences in the face of an immediate threat, for such factors assume

more significance in the absence of a security challenge. However, there is clear evidence that they are more likely to form alliances with extra-regional actors that are willing to support their political objectives. Interestingly, as the record during the cold war clearly demonstrated, ideological factors were more salient in alliances between Middle Eastern states and their superpower patrons.

In the 1950s and 1960s, conservative, pro-Western monarchies formed defence pacts against the radical, nationalist, republican governments that emerged in Syria, Egypt and Iraq. The latter prematurely attempted to form political unions and assumed a confrontational stance against Israel and its allies. However, the Arab defeat in the 1967 Six Day War discredited the radical camp, diminished the importance of ideology and regime structure in alliance formation, and eventually gave way to more pragmatic alignments against common threats. This was epitomized by the formation of the short-lived 'Arab Triangle' consisting of Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia in the early 1970s, and its bid to demonstrate Arab dissatisfaction with the post-1967 *status quo* and US policy by launching the 1973 October war. The emergence and evolution of the Syrian–Iranian axis over the past quarter century is a fascinating and rare example of an enduring alliance. After the overthrow of the Iranian monarchy in 1979, the new revolutionary Islamist regime and the secular Arab nationalist government in Syria cultivated close bilateral relations and eventually formed an alliance in response to the direct challenges posed by Iraq, Israel and the USA in the Levant and Persian Gulf during the 1980s and beyond.

The Syrian–Iranian axis is one of the most intriguing developments in modern Middle East politics. In the turbulent 1980s, the nature and longevity of the Tehran–Damascus partnership baffled many scholars and observers. Many were quick to write it off as a short-term, opportunistic alliance against Iraq, or describe it as a marriage of convenience that would dissolve rapidly once Iran ceased to deliver oil to Syria. Pointing to many differences in their respective ideologies, as well as their social and political foundations, most analysts expressed surprise at how a revolutionary, pan-Islamic theocracy like Iran could form an alliance with a secular, pan-Arab socialist republic like Syria.³ Moreover, while Ba'thist Syria claimed to be an ardent supporter and the rightful leader of the pan-Arab cause, revolutionary Iran advocated Islamic universalism and, during the Khomeini era, purportedly rejected the concept of the nation-state.⁴ Also, although Syria traditionally maintained strong ties with the

USSR and was a primary recipient of Soviet military aid in the 1980s, Moscow's relations with Tehran's ruling clerics were strained intermittently after the establishment of the Islamic Republic.⁵

In this book, I aim to provide an in-depth analysis of the forces that led to the emergence and consolidation of the Syrian–Iranian alliance during a turbulent decade in the modern history of the Middle East. The alliance between the two states, which has lasted for more than 25 years, has been an enduring feature of the political landscape of this troubled region. Moreover, since its inception, it has had a significant impact on moulding events and bringing about major changes in the contemporary Middle East. I show that, contrary to prevailing views (formed by the Syrian and Iranian regimes' authoritarianism and unpopularity in the West and in parts of the Arab world), the alliance between them has been essentially defensive and emerged in response to acts of aggression orchestrated by Iraq (1980) and Israel (1982), in both cases with the prior knowledge and tacit support of the USA. Because my research revealed three distinct phases in the evolution and institutionalization of the Damascus–Tehran axis, I devote one chapter to each of these stages.

In this brief introduction, I provide a general conceptual framework for understanding the genesis and longevity of the Syrian–Iranian nexus. In Chapter 1, which covers the emergence of the alliance between 1979 and 1982, I show that while the initial impetus for the relationship came from the overthrow of Iran's conservative, pro-Western monarchy in 1979, Iraq's invasion of Iran in September 1980 brought Syria and Iran closer together, with Syria providing valuable diplomatic and military aid to help Iran stave off defeat and expel the Iraqi invaders. In Chapter 2, I examine the period between 1982 and 1985 when Israel invaded Lebanon for a second time and challenged Syria in its backyard. Here, in 1983–85, Iran lent support to Syria by mobilizing Lebanon's Shiites to drive out Israeli and Western forces. In Chapter 3, I cover a critical and problematic phase in the development of the alliance when the two allies developed conflicting agendas, which by 1985 had created tensions between them. However, by the late 1980s, through continued bilateral consultations in which they were able to prioritize their respective objectives without impinging on the interests of the other, they were able to redefine the parameters of cooperation and consolidate their relationship on a more mature basis. Finally, in the fourth and concluding chapter, I look at the reasons why the alliance lasted beyond the 1980s into the twenty-first century.

Although Agha and Khalidi (1995) and Ehteshami and Hinnebusch (1997) shed light on certain aspects of the alliance, they focus primarily on its continued importance in the 1990s and provide only a general overview of the formative years of the Tehran–Damascus nexus. I, however, aim to trace in detail the origins and development of the strategic partnership between Damascus and Tehran from the toppling of Mohammad Reza Shah in early 1979 until the Syrian–Iranian intercession to halt Amal–Hezbollah clashes in Beirut and the end of the first Persian Gulf war in mid-1988. Besides providing an empirical survey with a chronology of events, through analysis, I intend to distinguish three phases in the evolution of the alliance and explain their significance both in terms of how they affected bilateral relations between the two states, as well as their regional implications in the volatile environment of 1979–88.

In my research I relied mostly on secondary sources (books, periodicals, newspapers), transcripts of radio broadcasts, official government statements, and personal interviews with former government officials and Middle East experts. Given the closed and often secretive nature of decision making in the Syrian Ba’thist and Iranian Islamist regimes, and the importance and sensitivity of cooperative ties between them, it is improbable that responsible officials would have engaged in frank discussions on these matters or provided first-hand knowledge about bilateral relations between the two states. Indeed, inaccessibility to primary sources and interviews with current government officials in Damascus and Tehran remain the main obstacle to a complete and accurate picture of the nature and extent of Syrian–Iranian collaboration during the first decade of the alliance. The opacity of political decision making among these regimes’ key figures and bodies poses a formidable challenge to any outsider trying to understand the inner workings of these authoritarian governments. I try to compensate with an exhaustive survey and analysis of the available secondary sources and attempt to fill in some of the gaps and clarify certain inconsistencies by obtaining first-hand information from former senior government officials. These include former Iranian president Abolhassan Bani-Sadr’s account of Syrian military aid to Iran in the early years of the Iran–Iraq hostilities (1980–81) and Tehran’s policy on the Syrian Muslim Brethren (Chapter 1); and former US assistant secretary of state (1981–89) Richard Murphy’s insights on the degree of Syrian–Iranian involvement in attacks on US assets in Lebanon in 1983–84 (Chapter 2).

My focus on the genesis and development of the Tehran–Damascus

nexus during this decade may give the impression that the maintenance and augmentation of their strategic bilateral links was the main foreign policy consideration of Syrian and Iranian leaders between 1979 and 1989. In some respects, this was the case for both partners, especially Iran. The Iranian militants' seizure of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979 (which plunged US–Iranian relations into an abyss and led to Iran's international isolation), and the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980 meant that Khomeini's regime became extremely dependent on Hafez Assad's diplomatic and military support. This was needed to stave off defeat and avoid regional isolation at a time when Saddam Hussein held the initiative, occupying large swathes of Iranian territory and trying to depict the war as an Arab–Persian conflict. With the expulsion of Iraqi forces from most of the areas they held in Iran by mid-1982 and the concurrent Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the pendulum swung the other way, with Syria requiring Iranian assistance to keep Iraq in check and mobilize Lebanon's Shiites to expel Israeli and Western forces from its backyard between 1982 and 1985. As the Israeli threat receded with the withdrawal of Tel Aviv's troops to the self-declared security zone in mid-1985, and Arab disenchantment grew as Iran continued the Gulf War, Iran once again became dependent on Syrian cooperation and goodwill to maintain a foothold in the Levant and avoid total regional isolation. This situation continued until the cessation of hostilities with Iraq in 1988. Overall, Tehran valued its strategic alliance with Syria more between 1979–82 and 1985–88, particularly against the backdrop of the poor state of US–Iranian relations throughout the 1980s and the erratic nature of its ties with the USSR and western Europe during that period. For Syria, the years from 1982 to 1985 represented the height of its reliance on Iran to undo the achievements of its foes in Lebanon. At the same time, at the international level, Syria continued to place great emphasis on its close links with the USSR in the first half of the 1980s because of the latter's status as a superpower and as its main provider of military and economic assistance. However, with the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 and the gradual cooling of Soviet–Syrian relations in the second half of the 1980s, a subtle shift occurred in Syrian perceptions of Moscow. Damascus realized that it would have to diversify its political and economic ties internationally and, at the same time, rely more heavily on regional allies and proxies such as Iran and Lebanon's Shiites to achieve its strategic and military objectives and to keep Israeli and Iraqi power in check. While my main focus is on the evolution of the Syrian–Iranian alliance, I also

attempt to locate the bilateral relationship within the context of the changing regional and international environment of the 1980s. I show how Syrian and Iranian policymakers viewed the situation evolving around them and how they tried to utilize their strategic partnership to achieve their objectives.

During 1980/1 and 1986/7 there were differences of opinion within the Iranian leadership about the extent and use of cooperative ties with Syria and, by 1984, Rif'at Assad had serious reservations about the strategic alliance with Iran. However, for three reasons, I decided not to concentrate on domestic factors. First, it is clear from the available evidence that throughout the 1980s and beyond, most key political decision makers in Tehran and Damascus firmly believed that perpetuating and strengthening the alliance was central to their foreign policies. Second, secretive decision making even now makes it difficult to ascertain what various members of the Syrian and Iranian leadership really think. Information on the main rifts or differences of opinion that were ultimately reflected in their domestic or regional policies are based on interviews and press accounts that appeared at the time in the Middle Eastern and Western media. Third, the available evidence and the authoritarian nature of the Syrian Ba'thist and Iranian Islamist systems suggest that domestic opinion was never taken into account. In fact, it was a non-issue, particularly for the Syrian government. Despite disapproval in the Syrian Ba'th Party and among the Syrian masses of the policy to support non-Arab Iran during its eight-year war with Arab Iraq, Hafez Assad and his inner political circle saw no need to alter their position to gain party approval or win domestic support.⁶ When the Iranian Islamist regime began to deliver oil to Syria and to expel the Iraqi army from much of its soil in 1982, the public gradually began to question the wisdom of crude shipments to Syria at a time when the Iraqi threat seemed to have receded and also opposed the continuation of the Gulf conflict. By the mid-1980s, with Syria failing to make timely payments for its oil purchases and the acute economic situation in Iran, some Iranian MPs became quite vocal in their opposition to continued shipments and to the logic of the alliance with Syria. However, despite some tensions in bilateral relations, Khomeini and his lieutenants would not be swayed and were determined to preserve links with their only significant Arab ally.⁷ Such is the nature of authoritarian doctrinaire regimes. Overall, my emphasis here is on the output and policies that emerged from the black box of Syrian-Iranian decision making.

In general, there is a wealth of information and analysis on the

evolution of the Syrian–Iranian alliance during its first decade. Through careful research and analysis, I try to put the various pieces together and to shed new light on linkages between major events and crucial decisions that were made in Tehran and Damascus during one of the most turbulent periods in the contemporary history of the Middle East – especially those that regional analysts and scholars have overlooked or ignored. For example, in Chapter 2, I put the case that the Israeli invasion of Lebanon on 6 June 1982 and the subsequent Syrian–Iranian consultations (7–17 June 1982) had a direct bearing on Tehran’s fateful decision to continue the Persian Gulf conflict and invade Iraq in the weeks that followed. In Chapter 3, I show how US–Iraqi military operations against Iran in the Persian Gulf during the spring of 1988 (designed to turn the tide of the Gulf conflict) prompted Tehran to throw its weight behind Lebanon’s Hezbollah in its violent confrontation with the rival, pro-Syrian Amal movement (albeit in a calculated and limited manner) and to try to maintain its precarious foothold in Lebanon. This bloody affair put the Syrian–Iranian alliance to the test since Tehran was overtly defying Damascus in its own backyard.

Before delving into the specific aspects of the genesis and development of the Syrian–Iranian alliance, it is useful to identify and elaborate on several general concepts and theoretical explanations to understand the strength and longevity of the cooperative ties between revolutionary Iran and Ba’thist Syria. First, the alliance consists of only two members: it has never been a broad coalition of states with various and divergent interests. Since it is small, it is more viable.⁸ In the words of Holsti et al., ‘the smaller the alliance, the more cohesive and effective it is, and the more important the contribution of each member.’⁹ Second, it has primarily been a defensive alliance aimed at neutralizing Iraqi and Israeli offensive capabilities in the Gulf and Near East, and thwarting American encroachment in the Middle East. In general, alliances with set and limited objectives are more stable and durable.¹⁰ Both Liska and Walt see defensive alliances as less fragile than offensive ones. In the latter case, once the opponent has been attacked and vanquished, the rationale for maintaining the alliance ceases to exist for the members, and they subsequently fall out over the fruits of their victory.¹¹ Third, the two partners’ priorities differ in the two arenas in which they cooperate. The Gulf region is the main area of concern for Iran, whereas for Syria it is the Levant. Over time, by continually consulting and modifying their aims, the two allies have come to recognize this reality and, in the process,

have tried to coordinate their policies and accommodate one another while still furthering their own interests.¹² In other words, between 1985 and 1988 Iran finally acknowledged that Syrian interests took precedence in the Arab–Israeli theatre, and Syria in return deferred to its Iranian partner when vital matters regarding Gulf security were at stake for the Islamist government. Though not all their interests converged, through consultation Tehran and Damascus gradually harmonized their positions as far as they could. As Liska posits in *Nations in Alliance*, the more complementary the interests of alliance members, the more easily intra-alliance compromises can be achieved.¹³ Furthermore, the fact that Syria has carried the greater part of the burden in checking Israeli power, and Iran's main role has been to serve as a bulwark against Iraqi expansionism in the Gulf and beyond, has meant that the two partners fulfil different functions, thus reinforcing the rationale and utility of their strategic links. In other words, the more pronounced the differentiation of functions of the members, the more cohesive the alliance.¹⁴ Fourth, the mere fact that the alliance has endured for so many years (especially by Middle East standards), gives it considerable weight and importance. Interestingly, in *Alliances and Small Powers*, Rothstein argues that 'once an alliance has been created, there is positive value placed on continuing it, even if it seems to perform very few functions.'¹⁵ Furthermore, Kaplan builds on this point by postulating that longstanding alliances are characterized by greater unity and legitimacy.¹⁶ It is also worth noting that if a member wishes to abandon an alliance that has become institutionalized, it is prudent to find another viable arrangement that has at least equal utility. In other words, the member will pay an opportunity cost unless it joins or forms an alternative arrangement that is at least equally useful as the previous alliance.

Finally, another general point needs to be made about the role of ideology in maintaining an alliance. Ironically, a crucial factor in the longevity of the Syrian–Iranian axis is that the states have different ideologies; herein lies the paradox. Quite often, alliances between states that espouse the same transnational universalistic ideology are less likely to endure than those in which ideology plays a minimal role. This is particularly true of the Middle East where authoritarian regimes predominate and frequently use ideology as a tool to boost their political legitimacy and base of support domestically and in neighbouring countries. Revisionist ideologies such as pan-Arabism and Islamic fundamentalism have frequently been quite divisive

because they are used to project power and influence and to destabilize rival states. In the Middle East, the record clearly shows that states sharing a common ideology compete for the mantle of leadership rather than form durable alliances. Each state may claim to be the legitimate leader, and demand others to relinquish their rights and sovereignty to form a single political entity. The most poignant example of this phenomenon was the failure of the various unity schemes during the 1950s and 1960s involving Nasserite Egypt, and the radical regimes in Syria and Iraq. Walt supports this view in *The Origins of Alliances*. He asserts that alliances among Arab states and communist countries that have sought to form a single centralized movement have been unstable and short-lived. In the final analysis, common ideologies have often served as an obstacle to unity, prompting states to compete with one another rather than form durable alliances.¹⁷ Iklé also recognized this point in *How Nations Negotiate* when he opined that in certain instances, alliances not characterized by doctrinal unity will more easily resolve internal differences without disrupting the partnership.¹⁸

In studying the Syrian–Iranian alliance it is apparent that Iran (a non-Arab nation) is not trying to champion Arab nationalism, unlike its Syrian partner, which considers itself ‘the beating heart of Arabism’. Syria, for its part, is not vying to lead the Islamic revivalist movement in the Middle East or elsewhere. Moreover, Iran refrained from supporting the Syrian Muslim Brethren in their ill-fated effort to overthrow the Ba’thist regime in Damascus during the early 1980s. In general, there has been neither ostensible competition on an ideological level (except in Lebanon during 1985–88) nor fear that one partner might upstage the other precisely because of their distinctly different ideological platforms. According to Dinerstein, ‘ideological dissimilarities will not disrupt alliance cooperation if none of the members is intent on political revolution in the others.’¹⁹

Both Ba’thist Syria and Islamic Iran have been fiercely independent states and, throughout the years following the toppling of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran, found it expedient to cooperate to thwart Iraqi and Israeli designs in the region and to frustrate US moves that implicitly or explicitly supported Tel Aviv and Baghdad. In addition, Damascus and Tehran were wary of Washington’s attempts to advance its own agenda and make inroads in the Middle East at their expense. During 1982–85, Syrian President Assad was determined to resist the Reagan administration’s effort to bring Lebanon within the US–Israeli orbit and to push for a piecemeal approach to resolve the Arab–Israeli

conflict. Khomeini's Iran shared Syria's concerns in the Levant and sought to punish Iraq for its invasion of Iran in 1980 and, after 1982, much to the consternation of Washington and its Arab allies, tried to oust Saddam Hussein from power. Moreover, since the end of the cold war, US hegemony in the Middle East has reinforced the logic of an alliance between Syria and Iran. Deep-seated concerns in Tehran and Damascus over US adventurism and the occupation of Iraq in 2003 have strengthened their resolve to stand together and thwart US ambitions in the region.

In the following chapters, I will demonstrate that Syrian–Iranian cooperation during the formative years of the alliance had a major impact on shaping the course of events in the Middle East and transformed the region. The joint policies pursued by Tehran and Damascus also had a profound effect on the actions of the superpowers in the Middle East. Not only did Assad and Khomeini succeed in inflicting one of the very few foreign policy defeats that Reagan experienced during his two terms in office, but they also proved adept at enlisting Soviet support on a number of occasions to attain their objectives. Furthermore, they frustrated Saddam Hussein and Menachem Begin's designs in the region. Careful, well-crafted strategies eventually led to the expulsion of the Iraqi army from Iranian territory by 1982, the withdrawal of US troops from Beirut in 1984, and the retreat of Israeli forces from most of the Lebanese territory they occupied by 1985 (and indeed the self-declared security zone by 2000). At the same time, despite their impressive achievements, there were limits to the Syrian–Iranian power in the region. As two middle powers that did not enjoy the backing of most regional states, and only received some qualified support from the USSR (until its demise in 1991), they were unable to alter the regional *status quo* in their favour, or determine the outcome of events on their own in the Levant and Persian Gulf. Although the Syrian–Iranian axis possessed limited offensive capability in regional terms, let alone on the international level, it was nonetheless a force to be reckoned with during the 1980s and beyond – one that has left an enduring mark on Middle East politics.

Chapter 1

The Emergence of the Syrian–Iranian Axis, 1979–82

The 1979 Iranian revolution was one of the most important milestones in modern Middle Eastern history. The overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty not only brought major changes to Iran, but also ushered in a new era of politics at the regional level. The new regime under Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership radically altered the content and form of Iranian foreign policy. Overnight, imperial Iran, which had once pursued a strongly pro-Western *status quo* foreign policy, was transformed into a new republic committed to a purportedly universalistic religious ideology and bent on changing the political map of the Middle East.

The revolutionary changes in Iran during 1978/9 sent tremors throughout the region, particularly the Arab world. While they alarmed many regimes that had previously enjoyed close ties with the imperial government, many non-aligned and pro-Soviet governments welcomed it enthusiastically. Moreover, it gave a major boost to and served as a powerful source of inspiration for various Islamic, Third World and revolutionary movements and political parties in the region and beyond.

The overthrow of the Pahlavi throne naturally brought with it a reversal in the pattern of Iran's alliances and enmities. At a stroke, the country's new leadership terminated Iran's long-standing alliances with the USA and Israel. Consequently, though not inevitably, Iran's relationship with the pro-Western Arab states suffered. As a result of the changing nature of Arab–Iranian relations, inter-Arab political configurations and alliances were reconsidered and reshaped to meet the requirements or challenge of Iran's new Islamic revolutionary ideology and foreign policy.

Prior to the Shah's fall, most Arab governments viewed the political order in the Middle East as predominantly Arab. Non-Arab actors like Israel and Iran were confined to the margins of mainstream Arab

politics, particularly during the heyday of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s when Nasser was in power. Then, Tel Aviv and Tehran saw radical Arab nationalism as a major threat to their national security and existence, and joined forces to counter the 'progressive Arab Front' under Nasser's leadership. But the devastating Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab–Israeli war and Nasser's demise three years later sounded the death knell of the radical period in mainstream Arab politics and the beginning of a new era of political pragmatism. This was clearly exemplified by the ascendance of new leaders such as Anwar Sadat in Egypt and Hafez Assad in Syria, who placed less emphasis on the role of ideology and made *realpolitik* a hallmark of their diplomacy in the decade that followed.

When the revolt against the monarchy erupted in Iran, the Arab political order was weak and in a state of disarray. The failure to derive any tangible benefits from the limited success of the 1973 Arab–Israeli war, the impasse over Palestine, the lingering domestic conflict in Lebanon, incessant inter-Arab feuding and Egypt's 'defection' with the signing of the Camp David accords in March 1979, had thrown the Arabs into total confusion. It was within this context that the Iranian revolution occurred.

As a major watershed in the history of the Middle East, the Iranian revolution and unique circumstances in the Arab world at the time dramatically altered the course of events in the Middle East. Revolutionary Iran's ideology and new foreign policy brought challenges or opportunities to a number of Arab regimes, particularly Iraq and Syria. The interplay between events in the Arab world and Iran in fact heavily influenced Saddam Hussein's decision to go to war against Iran in September 1980. Ironically, what was expected to be a swift Iraqi victory turned into one of the bloodiest and longest wars in modern Middle Eastern history. At the same time, the conflict turned the emerging Syrian–Iranian entente into a formal alliance – probably one of the most durable regional alliances – that has lasted to this day despite all odds and predictions to the contrary.

With the outbreak of the first Gulf war on 22 September 1980, many observers expected Syrian President Assad to join ranks with the other Arab leaders who rallied to aid Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein in his effort to deliver a major blow to non-Arab Iran and blunt the intrusive edge of its Islamic revolution. At the very least, after the recent break in Syrian–Iraqi relations and the looming possibility of a serious confrontation with Israel in Lebanon now that Egypt was no longer a frontline state, Assad was expected to declare his

neutrality. Indeed, in view of its precarious regional position, Damascus could have chosen to avoid having enemies on both its eastern and western flanks. Such expectations were partly based on the structural and ideological similarities between Assad's and Hussein's regimes. Both leaders had come to power through Ba'th Party orchestrated military coups in their respective countries and both espoused a pan-Arab socialist ideology. However, to the dismay of many, by 1982 the war had led to the consolidation of the emergent Syrian–Iranian axis.

There has been a great deal of debate among scholars and analysts over what prompted Damascus and Tehran to seal their 'unholy alliance' in spring 1982. Many observers put it down to their common hostility to Iraq. Although this was no doubt an incentive, it would be a gross oversimplification to regard it as the only important factor in developing the Syrian–Iranian alliance. Careful analysis reveals that, despite their differences and certain discrepancies, the birth of the Syrian–Iranian entente between 1979 and 1982 can be viewed as much more than an alliance of convenience against Iraq.

In this chapter, I aim to provide an accurate chronology of events and in-depth analysis of the chain of events and forces that moulded and influenced the start and eventual formalization of the relationship between the winter of 1979 and spring of 1982. It is important to note from the outset that Syria's decision to mend fences with Iran after the success of the Islamic revolution, must be observed through the prism of inter-Arab politics, Assad's leadership ambitions, and revolutionary Iran's new foreign policy orientation and ideology.

Syrian–Iranian relations before the 1979 revolution

Under the Shah, bilateral relations between the two states had been anything but cordial. Despite a brief thaw in the mid-1970s, their relations had fluctuated between outright hostility and cold peace throughout much of the 1960s and 1970s. Pahlavi Iran perceived Ba'thist Syria, with its close ties with the USSR and support for radical Arab movements, as a menace in the region. Moreover, Syria's vociferous claims that the Iranian province of Khuzestan (historically and more accurately known by Arabs as Arabestan) was 'an integral part of the Arab nation' because of its indigenous Arab population, and that the Gulf had an 'Arab character' greatly disturbed Iranian officials.¹ The Shah perceived radical Arab nationalism as a major threat to Iran's regional interests and national security.

Syria's Ba'thist leaders (who first seized the reins of power in 1963) saw imperial Iran as a source of instability in the Middle East and a

dangerous enemy of the Arab nation. They resented the Shah's close ties with Israel and conservative pro-Western Arab regimes. From their viewpoint, the Shah served as an instrument of US imperialism in the region by thwarting Arab aspirations and, more specifically, by impeding efforts to liberate Palestine from the Zionists.

Since full diplomatic relations were established in 1946, a striking and recurrent feature of modern Syrian–Iranian relations has been that the tightening or loosening of bilateral ties depends largely on the state at the time of Syrian–Iraqi and Iranian–Iraqi relations and the regional environment.² This was evident in the mid-1950s, but became more pronounced after the creation of the UAR in February 1958.³ Both Hashemite Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Pahlavi Iran were alarmed by the union between Egypt and Syria. King Faisal of Iraq subsequently visited Tehran to resolve outstanding differences with the Shah over their common borders and other issues. Indeed, Iranian–Iraqi relations improved noticeably during February–July 1958, prior to the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy.

In July 1960, when the Shah stated at a press conference that Iran already recognized Israel, UAR President Nasser severed diplomatic ties with it.⁴ It was thus no surprise that when Syria left the UAR in September 1961, the Shah welcomed the event and moved to restore full diplomatic relations with the new government in Damascus. However, following the Ba'thist seizure of power in Iraq and Syria in February/March 1963, and the ensuing tripartite negotiations in Cairo in March/April, Iran was extremely concerned about the prospect of a union between Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Despite the collapse of this initiative by mid-1963, Iran remained uneasy as the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'thists subsequently took steps to create a union between their two countries. This process came to an abrupt end when Abd al-Salam Arif ousted the Iraqi Ba'th Party in November 1963.

It is noteworthy that when Baghdad and Cairo drew closer after the Cairo summit of January 1964, and strengthened their political and military ties, Iraq's relations with Syria and Iran deteriorated. Nasser and Arif were both dismayed to see the Syrian Ba'th Party strengthen its grip on power and stabilize the situation. The Syrian Ba'thists, for their part, fearing being trapped between a 'hammer and anvil', launched an intensive propaganda war against Arif and the Syrian news media's attacks on Iran ceased. Damascus seemed to have modified its policy on Tehran to avoid needlessly alienating it in view of the emergent Iraqi–Egyptian alliance. Both Damascus and Tehran became concerned about the visit of the Egyptian chief of staff

Marshall Abd al-Hakim Amer to Amman in mid-1964 in a bid to draw Jordan into the Iraqi–Egyptian orbit.

Although Syrian–Iranian relations never improved markedly, by 1965 significant shifts had occurred in the Syria–Iraq–Iran triangle. As the Shah and Arif tried to ease tensions and reach a *modus vivendi* in the Gulf, Syrian–Iranian relations plunged to an all-time low when, in an unprecedented move, Prime Minister Yusuf Zu'ayyin's militant Ba'thist government called for the 'liberation' of Arabestan from 'Iranian occupation' and printed official maps designating it as part of the Arab homeland.⁵ Iran's riposte was to lodge an official protest with the Syrian government and withdraw its ambassador and most of its diplomatic staff from the country, leaving only one official representative in Damascus.

There was some improvement in bilateral relations after the June 1967 Arab–Israeli war when Iran's Red Lion and Sun Society (renamed Red Crescent Society after the 1979 revolution) sent medical personnel and humanitarian aid to assist the Syrian wounded and refugees displaced by the fighting.⁶ While diplomatic relations were upgraded to the *chargé d'affaires* level and trade links improved, there were intermittent tensions. In 1969, the situation again degenerated when the Syrians uncovered an Iranian espionage network in their country and the number of staff in their respective embassies was reduced.

In 1970, as the Jordanian–Palestinian confrontation erupted during Black September, with Syrian and Israeli military intervention in Jordan, Iran sent munitions and weapons to the Jordanian army⁷ and the Shah mediated between King Hussein and the Israelis. Through Iran's good offices, the Jordanian monarch obtained guarantees from Tel Aviv that its military intervention was only intended to crush the Palestinians, and would not aim to destabilize the Hashemite regime.⁸ Hafez Assad's successful coup in November 1970 brought no noticeable improvement in Syrian–Iranian relations. In July 1973, Assad condemned the ill-fated, Iranian-backed attempt by Iraqi intelligence chief Nadhim Kzar to topple the rival wing of the Ba'th Party in Baghdad on 30 June 1973.⁹

Bilateral relations between Syria and Iran improved during the 1973 Arab–Israeli war and its aftermath. During the conflict, Iran provided logistical, medical and non-military assistance to the Arab combatants.¹⁰ In the period that followed the war, Iran gave some financial assistance and relations warmed up to some degree. Within two months of the cessation of hostilities, in December 1973, the process of

upgrading relations to ambassadorial level began with the appointment of a new Iranian ambassador to Damascus.¹¹ In 1974, after several ministerial-level exchanges, Iran agreed to provide a US\$ 150 million loan and a US\$ 50 million grant to finance a number of industrial and agricultural development projects in Syria. High-level exchanges between the two erstwhile foes continued, and in 1975 Iran gave an additional US\$ 300 million in loans to Syria. The warming of relations between Syria and Iran and the simultaneous deterioration of Syrian–Iraqi ties in the period following the 1973 Arab–Israeli conflict, prompted Hafez Assad to undertake his first state visit to Iran in December 1975 to consolidate what seemed to be an emerging friendship with Iran. He was also determined to avoid being outmanoeuvred by the Iraqis, who had concluded the Algiers accord with Iran in March 1975 and were in the process of mending fences with their Iranian neighbour.¹² Assad's four-day state visit (28–31 December 1975) paved the way for further ministerial-level exchanges to expand political, economic and cultural ties between the two countries. However, the process is best described as a limited *rapprochement*.

With warmer Egyptian–US relations, Sadat's decision to pursue a separate peace with Israel and the Shah's close ties with Cairo and Washington, Assad had hoped to convince the Shah to use his influence to persuade the Americans to assume a balanced approach in their attempts to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict. Much to Assad's chagrin, the Iranian monarch refused to accommodate his request.¹³ The Shah instead encouraged Anwar Sadat's peace initiative towards Israel.¹⁴ Consequently, by the late 1970s, the rift between Tehran and Damascus seemed irreparable. It was therefore quite understandable that when the Shah was deposed in February 1979, Assad saw the change in government as a positive development and deemed it necessary to establish cordial ties with the new revolutionary government, which seemed sympathetic to the Arab cause and the plight of the Palestinians.

The Syrian experience in the regional context

Syria's motive for establishing close links with the new clerical regime can be partially understood in the context of inter-Arab and internal Syrian politics. Assad's bitter experiences of dealing with other Arab states between 1973 and 1979 had by 1979/80 prompted him to re-evaluate his regional policies.¹⁵ Egypt's betrayal in the 1973 Arab–Israeli war and its unilateral efforts following the war to work out a separate peace agreement with Israel, which eventually resulted in the

signing of the Israeli–Egyptian Sinai agreement of September 1975, had outraged the Syrians. With Egypt out of the picture, the efficacy of any military action on the part of the Syrians in response to Israeli aggression was greatly reduced.

Concurrently, in March 1975, Iraq signed the Algiers accord with Iran, which settled the border disputes between the two countries and implicitly recognized Iran's superiority in the Gulf. With its eastern borders and outlet to the Gulf now secure, in April 1976, after failing to reach an agreement with Syria on transfer fees (for exporting Iraqi oil via the trans-Syrian pipeline), Iraq informed Damascus that it would cease to use the trans-Syrian pipeline. Iraq's decision brought huge financial losses to Syria, which helplessly watched the deterioration of economic and political conditions at home and the decline of its power and prestige abroad.¹⁶

The evolution of the US-approved Saudi–Iranian–Egyptian axis, Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem in November 1977 and the Camp David accords in March 1979 further isolated Damascus. Syria was even sidelined at the November 1978 Arab summit held in Baghdad to create a united front against Egypt's warming relationship with Israel and, to its disappointment, witnessed the formation of the Saudi–Iraqi–Jordanian entente.¹⁷

Between October 1978 and July 1979 a *rapprochement* between Syria and Iraq seemed a distinct possibility. This was partly because of the need to forge a credible military alliance to keep Israeli power in check on the western front, thus relieving Syria of some pressure and bolstering Iraq, which was uneasy about the chaos in neighbouring Iran and its potential impact on its own Shiite population.¹⁸ A Syrian–Iraqi partnership did not, however, materialize. Mutual distrust and irreconcilable differences eventually brought the bilateral negotiations to a screeching halt in the summer of 1979 when Iraq accused Syria of involvement in a coup attempt to topple the Ba'thist regime in Baghdad, despite Syrian denials. Damascus was again isolated and placed in a vulnerable position *vis-à-vis* Israel and a hostile Iraq. It was thus no surprise that by 1979/80, the betrayals and disappointments of the past had killed any lingering Syrian hope of relying on fellow Arabs.¹⁹ Assad subsequently continued to cultivate even closer relations with the new revolutionary government in Tehran and watched events unravel in Iran with great interest.

Syrian–Iranian *rapprochement*: February–July 1979

Immediately after the collapse of the monarchy, on 12 February

1979, Assad sent Khomeini a telegram congratulating him for his triumph over the Shah. In his message, he praised the 'Iranian people's victory', and went on to say: 'we proclaim our support for the new regime created by the revolution in Iran. This regime is inspired by the great principles of Islam. The creation of this regime is in the Iranian people's greatest interest, as well as that of the Arabs and Muslims.'²⁰ In fact, Syria was the first Arab country to recognize the new regime in Iran, though Libya, Algeria, South Yemen and the PLO also expressed strong support for the new leadership in Tehran. Conversely, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt reacted cautiously. Iraq's foreign minister, for example, on hearing of the Shah's overthrow, only went so far as to say that 'Iran's internal affairs concern the Iranian people only.'²¹ However, it was clear, even during the winter of 1978/9, that the Iraqi Ba'thists were very concerned about the opposition movement in Iran having assumed a religious character. Baghdad was wary of a Shiite revival and its potential repercussions on Iraq. Even before the toppling of the Pahlavi throne, the Shah's close ally, King Hussein of Jordan had gone on record as denouncing Khomeini as a heretic.²²

Straight after the revolution, Hafez Assad's brother, Rif'at, sent envoys to Tehran to discuss ways of cooperating between the two countries, particularly against Iraq. Tehran followed up on these contacts by dispatching emissaries to Damascus to explore various options to lend support to the Iraqi opposition, particularly in the Shiite south. Rif'at, who served as commander of the Syrian defence brigades (*Saraya al-Difa'*), apparently opposed the Syrian-Iraqi unity talks, for he feared that they might benefit his leading rival for succession to his brother, former air force and intelligence chief, Na'ji Jamil, who had close ties with the Iraqi Ba'thists.²³

In March, the first senior Syrian official, information minister Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad, visited Iran where he met Ayatollah Khomeini in Qom and presented him with an illuminated Quran as a gift from Hafez Assad.²⁴ Apart from bilateral relations between the two states starting on the right footing, the regional foreign policies of both were strikingly similar. Damascus and Tehran perceived and interpreted various regional developments in the same manner. This trend reinforced the growing cooperation between the two states. In Iran's case, relations with Arab states that had enjoyed close relations with the *ancien régime* (Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iraq) gradually deteriorated. Conversely, Arab governments and movements that had been hostile to the Shah began to seek favour with revolu-

tionary Iran. Close ties were cultivated with the Polisario Front, Libya's Muammar Qadhafi and Shiite movements in both Iraq and Lebanon. It also came as no surprise in early May when Khomeini instructed the foreign ministry to sever diplomatic ties with Egypt 'bearing in mind the treacherous treaty between Israel and the Egyptian Government's unreserved obedience to the USA and Zionism'.²⁵

Syria also found itself with few reliable allies as events unfolded in early 1979. With Egypt out of the equation in the Arab–Israeli conflict, Syria initially pinned its hopes on the unity scheme with neighbouring Iraq. Indeed, some progress was made towards implementing the scheme in the winter of 1978/9. However, by April 1979, it had become clear that the leadership of the two rival wings of the Ba'th Party had incongruent visions about what unification would entail. As progress in the negotiations became painfully slow and finally grinded to a halt, Assad began to give careful consideration to the next viable option – an alliance with Iran to outflank Iraq, bolster his position vis-à-vis the Gulf Arab sheikhdoms and strengthen his hand among the Lebanese Shiites.

Following a referendum on Iran's future form of government, Assad sent another congratulatory message to Khomeini on the Iranian people having finally achieved their aspirations. He also expressed confidence that their bilateral relations would continue to grow and flourish at the official and popular levels. Their *rapprochement* in the spring and summer of 1979 coincided with a marked deterioration in Iran's relations with Iraq and the Gulf Arab states. While Tehran encouraged the Iraqi Shiites to defy the government in Baghdad, Iraq also conducted a wide range of activities to support centrifugal forces on the periphery of Iran, including Kurdish and Arab movements that demanded autonomy or independence from the Iranian state. By late spring, a major insurrection had broken out in Iranian Kurdistan, while in the oil province of Khuzestan (Arabestan) local resistance movements had begun to oppose the regime by attacking oil installations and government facilities. The Iraqi Ba'th Party did its utmost to encourage the unrest in these regions in order to pin down Iranian security forces, thereby weakening the Iranian state to the benefit of Iraqi power and influence in the Gulf region.

One should note that Iraq's campaign was not totally offensive: it was partially a defensive attempt to neutralize and deter Iranian interference in Iraq's domestic affairs by levelling the playing field. By June 1979, a propaganda war was in full swing with the media of each

side denouncing the other. Tehran portrayed Iraqi leaders as unbelievers belonging to a 'Takriti clique', while Baghdad depicted the clerics as 'turbaned shahs' with pre-revolutionary ideas of Persian racial superiority and intent on expanding Iran's 'lebensraum' in the Gulf region at the expense of the Arabs.

In an editorial on 14 June in the Iraqi daily *Al-Thawrah*, the author severely criticized the theocratic regime in Tehran and belittled the past achievements of Persian civilization, by arguing that:

Persia was liberated from the tyranny of emperors only twice in thousands of years. The first time was by the Muslim Arabs who bravely fought Anoushiravan, defeated his army and demolished his empire – which was built on tyranny and corruption – and spread Islam, the religion of right and justice, in Persia. The second time the Iranians were only able to rid themselves of their tyrannical emperor, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, through Islam – for whose advancement and spread among nations, including the Persian nation, primary credit should go to the Arabs.

As early as June that year, Tehran radio's Arabic service called on Iraqi people to unite and topple the tyrannical regime that was oppressing them.²⁶ Then, statements by some prominent clerics with no official status in the regime further tarnished Arab–Iranian relations. The most notable instance occurred at a press conference in Qom on 15 June, when Ayatollah Sadeq Rouhani declared that Bahrain was an integral part of Iran. His statement, which Baghdad and Cairo sharply rebuked, provoked a strong reaction throughout the Arab world. By July, Iran's relations with Iraq and many other conservative Arab states had degenerated to such a degree that two distinct camps with conflicting positions on Iran had crystallized in the Arab world. The battle lines of the Persian Gulf War had been drawn.

Before looking at the numerous developments in Syrian–Iranian and Arab–Iranian relations in the year preceding the outbreak of the Gulf War, it is necessary to present a brief overview and analysis of Iran's new foreign policy after the toppling of the Pahlavi throne and the Syrian reaction.

New Iranian foreign policy and the Syrian response

Once in power, the new regime in Tehran followed up on the policies

of Shahpour Bakhtiar's government, which had been in power for the last 37 days of the imperial regime, which broke off diplomatic relations with Israel and South Africa, withdrew from CENTO and announced that Iran would no longer assume the role of the West's policeman in the Gulf. With respect to the Arab–Israeli conflict, Tehran turned over the former Israeli embassy to the PLO as an expression of its solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Iran not only became an enemy of Israel but also identified with the position of the Steadfastness Front.

In the light of Iran's new political posture and Egypt's banishment from the Arab fold, Syrian officials argued that losing Egypt to Israel could be offset by forging an alliance with Persian Iran. As they saw it, nurturing an Arab–Iranian friendship would strengthen the Arab camp. Despite Egypt's absence, a powerful new ally like non-Arab Iran would enhance the ability of the Arab states to undermine Israeli power in the region. Moreover, with the loss of Iran being one of the greatest setbacks suffered by the West and Israel since Nasser's rise in Egypt almost a quarter of a century earlier, the Arabs would be foolhardy not to exploit this new opening.²⁷

On changing Tehran's foreign policy, the Iranian authorities took measures to bring public opinion in the country in line with the state's new international political orientation. Unlike the Shah, who tried to generate a chauvinist ideology by glorifying Iran's pre-Islamic history, and to purify Persian culture by ridding it of outside influences (particularly Arab), the revolutionary regime downplayed Iran's Persian heritage to emphasize its Islamic character. The Iranian authorities made systematic efforts to stress the commonality of interest, history and culture between Persians and Arabs within the framework of the Islamic *ummah* (community). The increase of Arabic language instruction and Arab studies in the curricula of schools and universities reflected this trend.²⁸ Some Iranian officials stated that the Persian Gulf should be called neither 'Persian' nor 'Arabian' but the 'Islamic' Gulf.²⁹ The Iranian foreign minister, Karim Sanjabi, announced that Prime Minister Bazargan's provisional government would reconsider the fate of the three Gulf islands Iran had occupied since November 1971 (Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa) and would possibly turn them over to the UAE. Politically, Iran's newfound flexibility on issues pertaining to the Gulf and its security were part of an overall effort to show friendliness to the Gulf Arab states. From the ideological perspective of the Islamic universalist approach, it was felt that territorial disputes and names of

bodies of water should not drive a wedge between Muslim peoples, regardless of their nationality.

The Syrians, for their part, tried to convince their fellow Arabs that the Islamic revolution provided 'a unique opportunity to end the historic Arab–Persian animosity' and bring Iran into the Arab camp.³⁰ On the other hand, they knew quite well that if the Arabs took a hostile stance towards Iran, there was a distinct possibility that Tehran would renew its links with Tel Aviv and Washington.³¹ They also knew that Iran's revolutionary ideology contained internationalist and indigenous ideas that were incompatible – namely an Islamic universalist ideology on the one hand versus Iranian nationalism influenced by Ithna Ashari (Twelver) Shiism on the other. Historically, these two contending positions had presented Iran policy makers with a major dilemma. Like other revolutions that occurred in a specific national and international context, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic could be interpreted as the product of a dialectical relationship between Iran's affinity with Arabs because of its Islamic faith versus Iranian nationalism, which differentiates Iran from its Arab neighbours.³²

Many Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq, felt threatened by the vitriolic rhetoric emanating from Tehran and so did not share Syria's enthusiasm for the Iranian revolution. They did not see the revolution as an opportunity to end the Arab–Iranian rift, but rather as an event that could spark domestic unrest in neighbouring states and threaten regional stability. As it turned out, Iranian–Iraqi relations, for instance, were marked by tension and distrust from almost the very beginning.

It is important to note that the failure of the Syrian–Iraqi unity talks corresponded in time with the emergence of the Islamic Republic in Iran. In fact, the 1979 Iranian revolution sharpened already existing antagonisms and introduced new stumbling blocks on the path to reconciliation. On almost every issue to do with Iran, be it the Shah, Khomeini, Shiite fundamentalism or Arab–Iranian relations, Damascus and Baghdad had conflicting views. While Iraqi–Iranian relations steadily improved under the Shah between 1975 and 1979, Syrian–Iranian ones deteriorated over the same time period. In the 1970s, Syria had provided a safe haven to the Shah's opponents, while Iraq had expelled Khomeini at the Shah's request in October 1978.³³ Assad welcomed the Shiite awakening in the Middle East after the Iranian revolution, while Baghdad feared that Iran would incite the restive Shiite population in southern Iraq to rebel against it.