

المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
ARAB CENTER FOR RESEARCH & POLICY STUDIES
(Doha Institute)



www.dohainstitute.org

Case Analysis

The Syrian Revolution within the Turkish-Iranian Matrix: Current predicament and prospects

Ali Husain Bakir

Doha, February - 2012

Series (Case Analysis)

Contents

THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION WITHIN THE TURKISH-IRANIAN MATRIX: CURRENT PREDICAMENT AND PROSPECTS 1

FOREWORD:	1
I. THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION AS VIEWED BY IRAN AND TURKEY.....	2
A. THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION AS SEEN BY IRAN	2
B. THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION FROM A TURKISH PERSPECTIVE	4
II. THE FOUNDATIONS FOR IRANIAN AND TURKISH POLICY TOWARDS SYRIA.....	6
A. IRAN	6
B. TURKEY	8
III. IRANIAN AND TURKISH REACTIONS: STEPS TAKEN TOWARDS THE SYRIAN REGIME ..	10
A. IRANIAN MEASURES	10
B. TURKISH MEASURES	14
IV. SIGNS OF A COOLING IN TURKISH-IRANIAN RELATIONS IN RESPONSE TO THE EVENTS.....	16
V. CONCLUSION: THE FATE OF THE SYRIAN REGIME: REPERCUSSIONS ON IRAN AND TURKEY..	19

Foreword:

The Syrian revolution came as a surprise to the authorities in both Ankara and Tehran, as it was to observers of Syrian affairs, not to mention the Syrian regime itself. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad himself stated in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* on 31 January, 2011, that Syria would be an exception to the rule of the popular revolutions witnessed by other countries, claiming that the reason that there would be no Syrian uprising was that the Syrian authorities were “very close to the beliefs of the people”, belying a belief that his government’s ability to exploit its opposition to US hegemony would be a sufficient tool to insulate them from any public outcry; he was fully confident that there would be no protests in Syria.¹ When the Syrian revolt actually began, it became a turning point for the governments in both Turkey and Iran, and brought to the forefront the discord between their regional agendas², corroborating what many observers had previously claimed, that the presence of a regional alliance which included Syria, Hizbullah, Iran and Turkey, was simply an attempt by some of these parties to contain Turkish power within the Iranian fold, ensuring that increased Turkish influence in the region would not be a counter-balance either to Iranian influence or to Israeli intransigence.³ The pace of the protests has set such ambitions aside, showing them to be mere “fantasies”, and has placed Turkey and Iran at opposite ends of a conflict, and has heightened tensions between both sides: the future of the Syrian regime will be a decisive factor in determining how this conflict unfolds, with the ultimate fate of the Syrian regime likely to impinge negatively on one or the other of the two sides (being Turkey and Iran).

¹ See:

Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894.html>

² For more details see: Ali H Bakeer, “Those Adversely Affected by the Rising Role of Turkey”, published in the Lebanese *An Nahar* newspaper on June 13, 2010:

<http://alibakeer.maktoobblog.com/1599579>

³ For a discussion of how Turkish regional policies conflict both with those of the Israelis and of the Iranians, please see: Ali H Bakeer, “The Arab Role in Turkish Regional Ambitions: Balancing Peoples’ Needs and Political Demands”, published in the London-based *Al Hayat* on 6 April, 2010:

<http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/127144>

A Turkish version of the article is also available:

Ali Hüseyin Bakır, TÜRK BÖLGESEL PROJESİNDE ARAP YATIRIMI: HALKLARIN TALEPLERİ İLE SİYASETİN GEREKLİLİKLERİ ARASINDA DENGİ KURMAK, T.C. BAŞBAKANLIK BASIN - YAYIN ve ENFORMASYON GENEL MÜDÜRLÜĞÜ, April 6, 2010:

<http://alibakeer.maktoobblog.com/1599534>

I. The Syrian revolution as viewed by Iran and Turkey

A. The Syrian revolution as seen by Iran

Upon close examination of the Iranian attitude towards the Syrian revolution, one can conclude that the [official] Iranian position has been one of steadfast support for the Syrian regime. Its attitude towards the uprising in Syria has varied from conscious neglect of the revolt, to accusing protesters, to a position which blames a “foreign conspiracy” for stirring the uprising; the Iranian authorities have adopted the official Syrian line, and have gone on to try to find a resolution to their crisis.

At the beginning of the Syrian revolution, official Iranian media avoided commenting on these events, and chose to focus instead on the situation in Bahrain and Yemen; this was followed by an official policy of intentional disregard for what was happening in Syria, which affected all levels of Iranian decision-making. This situation prevailed until the end of March, and the beginning of April, 2011.⁴ Yet the increased level of protest in Syria, and its expanding geographical spread, together with the increasing number of those protesters killed by the regime, compelled the Iranian authorities to take notice and pay attention to what was happening within the borders of their ally.

The first Iranian recognition of this situation was a comment by Iran’s Ambassador to Damascus, Sayed Ahmed al Mousavi, who was speaking at the event “The Islamic Revival and Countering Sectarianism in Syria”, whence he stated that there is a conspiracy and the protests were being driven by “[foreign] enemies” of the Syrian state, comparing the Syrian rebellion to the Green Movement which followed the 2009 Presidential elections in Iran.⁵ Mousavi openly accused the protesters of being “foreign agents” who were taking their marching orders from “enemies [of Syria] and from Zionists” to fight against the Syrian state which stood in opposition to US and Israeli strategic plans for the region.⁶ It was for this reason, said Mousavi, that the Syrian people should stand by their regime. According to the Iranian Ambassador to Damascus, the Tehran

⁴ See:

Babak Rahimi, “Iranian Reaction to the Great Syrian Revolt”, The Jamestown Foundation, 22/4/2011: [www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=37834&cHash=75eb01045ca344749cddbe b8653d0a5d](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=37834&cHash=75eb01045ca344749cddbe b8653d0a5d)

⁵ For further details on the Iranian Green Movement and its conflict with the Iranian regime,

See: Ali H Bakeer et al, Iran: Conservatives, the Green Movement and the Arab Revolutions, Al Misbar Center for Studies and Research (Dubai, UAE), Volume 53, May 2010;

⁶ To read the statement of Iran’s Ambassador to Damascus, Sayed Ahmad Mousavi, see Fars News Agency Report on April 4, 2011:

<http://arabic.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=9001150102>

authorities were confident in the ability of the al-Assad regime to overcome the problem and put an end to the “sedition” being witnessed in their country.⁷

These statements were followed by remarks made by the Iranian government’s official spokesman, Ramin Mehman-Parsat in mid-April, who expressed the view that the Syrian protests were “a mischievous act of Westerners, particularly Americans and Zionists.” Mehman-Parsat also described how the [Western] media “are trying to create an artificial protest or are exaggerating the demands of a minority and presenting it, instead, as the demand and will of the majority.” According to the spokesman, the Americans were targeting “countries like Iran and Syria” because of their “support for the resistance.”⁸ These statements were echoed by the Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi, who voiced the opinion that “foreigners” were trying to “create unrest in Syria.”⁹ These efforts appeared to be an organized Iranian effort to protect the Syrian regime and its official line: It was Syrian President Bashar al Assad who stated on March 30, 2011 that what Syria was witnessing was a “grand conspiracy”, in which “regional neighbors and [global powers] were cooperating together with certain sectors within the country.”¹⁰

These statements by Iranian officials ushered in an official Iranian media campaign targeting the Syrian revolution, one which was based on three primary narratives:¹¹

1. The events in Syria are part of a US-Israeli conspiracy;
2. The Arab States in the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, are making use of the Al Jazeera television network to promote sedition in Syria;
3. Regional political factions, particularly Lebanese Sunni groups (the Future Movement led by Saad Hariri) are working to de-stabilize Syria.

This seeming contradiction of how the Iranian State was dealing with the various Arab revolts was brought to a head in the speech delivered by Iranian Supreme Leader [a position which mixes both theological and political roles], Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei, who pointed out during the commemoration event held for Ayatollah Khomeini in June, 2011 that: “In Syria, the hand of America and Israel is evident”. He contrasted this to other revolutions in which Iranian

⁷ “Iran’s President: Syria is Capable of Overcoming this Crisis”, published by the Syrian government’s *Al Thawra* newspaper, on 8 June, 2011:

http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy/_print_veiw.asp?FileName=28167642920110608020414

⁸ Iran calls Syrian protests a Western plot, Reuters, 12/4/2011:

www.reuters.com/article/2011/04/12/us-syria-iran-idUSTRE73B22V20110412

⁹ Ahmadinejad says Syria needs no foreign intervention, (AFP), 10/5/2011

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5iGArlyLUC4ImIHdIpmf7gPyJO8og?docId=CNG.d9be2af4c7111ceebb9f06f4d37012ee.d1>

¹⁰ Syrian President Bashar Al Assad’s speech to the Syrian people, delivered at the Syrian parliament on March 30, 2011, can be seen in full online::

www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhOrWINE8y8&feature=related

¹¹ Babak Rahimi, “Iranian Reaction to the Great Syrian Revolt”, *Op. Cit.*

support is at hand: “Wherever a movement is Islamic, populist, and anti-American, we support it”.¹² The Iranian legislature is also behind this interpretation of events: the leader of the Foreign and National Security Affairs Committee within it, Ala Eddin Boroujerdi, has gone along with the “foreign conspiracy” explanation of Syria’s revolt, as has the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.¹³

B. The Syrian revolution from a Turkish perspective

In contrast to the Iranian position, it is apparent that Ankara has adopted the demands of the Syrian protesters as its own. The Turkish authorities’ approach to the Syrian government, on the other hand, has developed over time and has been shaped by events: it has gone from one of advising the Syrian government to reform to meet popular demands; to discrediting the [Syrian] regime’s official line; to one of pressuring the regime; to losing their confidence in the Syrian authorities; to cutting off ties with the regime until, finally, adopting the position of demanding that international sanctions be placed on Syria.

The first official Turkish response to the Syrian revolution was a statement by the Turkish Foreign Ministry issued on March 24, 2011, which expressed sorrow for the deaths and injuries during the protests, and demanding that those responsible [for the shootings] be held accountable, and that political detainees be released. The Turkish authorities were thus demanding that the “legitimate demands” of the Syrian people be met without delay, and offered to provide any support to achieve this.¹⁴ This statement pointed towards the official Turkish stance during that phase of the situation, with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Teyyep Erdoğan calling Syrian President Bashar al Assad twice over a three-day period, to express the same position.¹⁵

¹² " An Arabic link to Imam Khamenei’s speech delivered on the occasion of the commemoration of Imam Khomeini: “The Arab Revolutions shall Prevail, and Palestine Shall be Freed”, available at the website of Lebanese Al Manar:

www.almanar.com.lb/adetails.php?eid=58136&frid=21&cid=21&fromval=1&seccatid=34

¹³ Geneveive Abdo, “How Iran Keeps Assad in Power in Syria: The Weapons, Technology, and Expertise Tehran Sends Damascus”, *Foreign Affairs*, August 25, 2011:

www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68230/geneive-abdo/how-iran-keeps-assad-in-power-in-syria?page=show

¹⁴ The Turkish Foreign Ministry’s Statement on Events in Syria, statement 82, Published March 25, 2011:

www.mfa.gov.tr/٢٠١١-مارس-٢٥-التاريخ-٨٢-الرقم-ar.mfa

¹⁵ For details see: Ali H Bakeer, “The Determinants of the Turkish Position towards the Syrian crisis: The immediate dimensions and future repercussions”, published by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, 29 June, 2011:

<http://english.dohainstitute.org/Home/Details?entityID=5ea4b31b-155d-4a9f-8f4d-a5b428135cd5&resourceId=d86b0350-aae6-4836-8cf4-0e7cb377585f>

In a televised interview, broadcast on May 2, 2011, Erdoğan warned Assad of the possible results should the killing of civilians continue, and warned him not to repeat the mistake of the Hama massacre of 1982. Erdoğan pointed out that Syria would not be able to recover from such a situation again, stressing that if events similar to the Hama massacre were repeated, the international community would be driven to take action. Turkey, said Erdoğan, would carry out its responsibilities in such a situation.¹⁶

Erdoğan went on to fully discredit the official Syrian narrative of the events for the first time on May 10, 2011, when he stated: “there are no infiltrators and armed gangs [involved in the rebellion] as Damascus says: our understanding of the situation is completely different. The [Syrian] security services have the right to defend themselves, but they are facing an unarmed population. ... The number of fatalities has now surpassed 1,000; we do not want a repeat of the Hama, Halabja and Homs massacres. It is wrong for a government to kill its own people.”¹⁷

In the same month, Ankara froze high-level diplomatic ties with Syria, on the grounds that the Turkish authorities had “heard a lot of promises” coming from Syria but that they need to “see actions.”¹⁸ Turkish rhetoric on Syria escalated through to August, when the Turkish Prime Minister cautioned the Syrians that Turkey would join the international community in taking action against Syria, if the “blood-letting” did not cease “immediately”, and appropriate reforms were not implemented.¹⁹ This stance reached its peak with the dispatching of Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to meet with Syrian President Bashar al Assad for six hours,²⁰ conveying a simple message, described as Turkey’s “final warning” to Syria: all military operations against civilians must cease, and immediately²¹. Later, the President of the Turkish Republic stated that his country had lost all confidence in the Syrian regime, stressing that Turkey’s relations with the Syrian people were more important;²² this statement was followed by the formal announcement by Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan that diplomatic ties to the Syrian

¹⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ “Ankara expects action, suspends high-level diplomatic ties with Syria”, published in *Ash Sharq Al Awsat* newspaper, London, May 17, 2011:

<http://aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11858&article=622067>

¹⁹ “Erdoğan sends Turkish FM to increase pressure on Syria”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, August 7, 2011:

www.hurriyetdailynews.com/mob_nx.php?n=erdogan-sends-turkish-fm-to-up-pressure-on-syria-2011-08-07

²⁰ “Turkey raises pressure on Syria”, *Aljazeera*, August 10, 2011:

<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/08/20118917850404477.html>

²¹ “Turkey issues “final word” to Syria”, *Reuters*, August 15, 2011:

www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/15/us-turkey-syria-davutoglu-idUSTRE77E43G20110815

²² “Turkish President Gul: We’ve Lost Our Confidence in Syrian Administration”, *The Journal Of Turkish Weekly*, August 28, 2011:

www.turkishweekly.net/news/122514/

regime were being cut, and that Turkey was preparing to place sanctions²³ on Syria, even as the European bloc within the United Nations Security Council was shirking away from doing so.²⁴

II. The foundations for Iranian and Turkish policy towards Syria

A. Iran

1. **Syria as a long-standing strategic ally:** The relationship between the Syrian regime and the Islamic Republic of Iran is more than merely “special”: the alliance between the two states is in fact quite exceptional. Spanning three decades, it has proven to be the most durable, longest-standing alliance in the Middle East, a region where international alliances are tenuous and relations between states are tempestuous. The Assad regime has provided Iran with invaluable support, particularly during the Iran-Iraq war. Whilst other Arab states sought to present a unified position with Iraq against Iran, Syria undid the Arab League consensus by siding with Iran, quashing the idea of a Persian-Arab conflict, which is how the Iraqis sought to present the situation.* Syria assisted in the training of a large part of the Iranian forces, and gave the Iran a foothold within the Arab countries by allowing cadres of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard to enter Lebanon, whom they continued to support in the guise of Hizbullah.²⁵

These shared policies and others, which have been a feature since the Islamic Revolution in Iran and until today, have served to strengthen the bonds between the two countries, a bond which is growing in significance, particularly for Iran which seeks to project its power onto the Arab countries. For the Iranians, the aim is to move from a model of having a “strategic partner” in Syria, to a model where the two countries “share the same fate.”²⁶ It would seem normal then, for Iran to provide its ally with all the tools it can muster to help the Syrian regime overcome the first true test of its legitimacy.

²³ “Turkey Turns the Page on Syria: Ties are Cut and Sanctions will be Imposed”, *Al Hayat* newspaper, September 22, 2011:

<http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/310158>

²⁴ “Turkey to press ahead with sanctions against Syria”, *The Guardian*, 29/9/2011:

www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/29/turkey-sanctions-syria-ankara-assad

* It should be noted that Libya and Sudan were to later to take the Iranian side on the conflict, while the scale of their support simply cannot be compared to that of Syria

²⁵ For a detailed discussion of Iranian-Syrian Relations, please see:

BÜLENT KENEŞ, “Iran's role in Syria”, *Today's Zaman*, June 12, 2011:

www.todayszaman.com/columnist-248126-irans-role-in-syria.html

²⁶ *Ibid.*

2. **The internal factor: fears of a contagious revolution:** The Syrian regime has broken the pattern amongst Arab states trying to deal with uprisings on their soil, by the [sustained] use of Iranian tactics in quelling protests. The similarity in how Syria and Iran deal with the regime-opposition question has not been lost on the authorities in Tehran. This is the source for many of the Iranian regime's fears; the feeling is that the success of the popular uprising in Syria would embolden the Green Movement in Iran, encouraging them to face the Iranian regime in a similar way.²⁷ The Iranian opposition is closely monitoring developments in Syria, and its leaders have repeatedly declared their support for the opposition in their country's ally, dedicating some of their social media capacities to this effort (Facebook²⁸ and Twitter.)²⁹ The Coordination Committee for the Path of Green Hope (the highest decision-making body within Iran's Green Movement) has also demanded that their government cease its support of the Syrian regime, stating its support for the Syrian revolution.³⁰

3. **Fears of the repercussions following the fall of the Syrian regime:** A third reason for Iran to support the Syrian regime is the fear of what would happen to Iran's regional project as a whole in the event of the Syrian government being toppled. The fall of the Syrian regime would mean that three decades of material, sectarian, ideological and political investment on the part of the Iranians into the Arab world would have come to nought. Besides the threat of the rebellion spreading to within Iran's borders, there is also the threat that the country would find itself, in the best possible scenario following the fall of the Syrian regime, regionally isolated.

The fall of the Syrian regime would lead to a geopolitical tremor which would put an end to the current arc of Iranian influence which stretches from Palestine and Lebanon to Iran itself via Iraq.³¹ This fear is evident not only in the statements made by Iranian

²⁷ Geneive Abdo, "How Iran Keeps Assad in Syria", *Op. Cit.*

²⁸ See the facebook page of the Iranian Green Movement: The Green Movement of Iran Supports the Syrian Revolution

www.facebook.com/green.movement.syria.revolution

²⁹ See the Tweets of the Iranian Green Movement, and other internet sites:

<http://is.gd/vTc78U> or

www.syrianemergencytaskforce.org/2011/05/25/%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%B7%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%B6%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%A7/

³⁰ "Green Movement Council warns Iran regime, sides with Syrian protesters", *The Green Voice of Freedom*, June 8, 2011

<http://en.irangreenvoice.com/article/2011/aug/06/3231>

³¹ For more details: Ali H Bakeer, "Iran's Project in the Region: Present Realities and the Future Following the Arab Revolutions", Annual Strategic Review, Ninth edition, to be printed, *Al-Bayan* and the Arab Center for Humanities.

representatives, but in those of their allies in the Iraqi government, and amongst religious clerics loyal to them in Bahrain, Iraq and Syria. In those places, many of these clerics have gone on to pronounce the protesters in Syria to be traitors to their country, and to cast them as Islamist extremists or *takfiriyeen* [Arabic words which means Muslims who practices *takfir* - in Arabic it means the fact of accusing others of apostasy or of being an infidel].³²

B. Turkey

1. **Factors related to the nature of the new Turkish regime:** Particularly when it comes to measures being taken to reinforce democracy, human rights and civil liberties; Turkey would be undoing years of hard work in the region and would undermine itself if it were to take a position in support of the Syrian regime against the protesters. Indeed, Turkey would damage the image it has tried to create for itself since 2002, both locally and on an international level. This sentiment of the “New Turkey” was expressed by Ibrahim Kalin, the Chief Foreign Policy Adviser to Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayep Erdoğan: “Change in the Arab world is inevitable and must reflect people's legitimate demands for justice, freedom and prosperity. And change must come without violence. ... Contrary to what some critics claim, these developments rectify Turkey's position in the Middle East. Turkey stands to gain from a democratic, pluralist and prosperous Arab world...”³³
2. **Factors related to Turkish foreign policy:** The Turkish authorities have spent much time in the last several years in discussions with regard to “legitimacy” and “popular will” as bases for their foreign policy. This is the policy which has informed Turkish criticism of Israeli attacks against Gaza, and even drove Turkey into a confrontation with the Israelis. This is the same discourse which drove Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan to famously address former Egyptian President Mubarak, calling on him to step down.³⁴ This foreign policy would also later explain the support for the Libyan National Transitional Council, after the Turks had exhausted all their other efforts to persuade Qaddafi to step down. In this regard, Irshad Hormuzlu, Chief Adviser to Turkish President Abdullah Gul: “It is natural for Turkey to support the Syrian revolution, and to support the demands of the Syrians, just as it has done for all of the Arab states which have witnessed popular uprisings ... It is natural for Turkey to address its concerns to the

³² Ibid

³³ See:

Ibrahim Kalin, “Turkey and a democratic and prosperous Arab world”, *Today's Zaman newspaper*, May 18, 2011: www.todayszaman.com/columnistDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=244346

³⁴ Oytun Orhan, “Turkey-Iran Rivalry over Syria”, ORSAM, May 16, 2011: www.orsam.org.tr/en/showArticle.aspx?ID=556

Syrian government, and beseech them to listen to the legitimate, and just demands of their people.”³⁵

3. **Turkish relations with the people of Syria:** The Turkish position is that the demands of the Syrian people for enhanced freedoms, for democracy and the removal of all restrictions on personal and political freedoms. In the view of the Turkish government, their erstwhile good relations with the Syrian regime does not have to come at the expense of the Syrian people, particularly if the Syrian government were willing to implement rapid and substantive reforms.³⁶ It is true that the close relations between the Turkish and Syrian governments, coupled with Turkish fears of the potential chaos created by the vacuum left by the toppling of the regime—which may include sectarian conflict or a possible foreign intervention—may have served to soften the severity of criticism by Turkey of the Syrian regime. Consequently, Turkey has taken a gradual approach in dealing with the Syrian regime, demanding that Syria implement reforms.³⁷ Yet the fact that Turkey enjoys wide popular support amongst the Syrian people, together with Turkey’s loss of faith in the ability of the Syrian regime to reform itself, served to heighten the tensions between the two sides, and pushed Turkey to raise the level of criticism against the Syrian authorities. This was accentuated by the fact that many Turkish officials believe that they cannot leverage any influence in Syria to begin with;³⁸ it seems to them that the Syrian regime’s only friend is Iran.³⁹
4. **No barriers to dealing with the alternative:** The Turkish government does not share Iran’s sense of foreboding in dealing with a post-Assad regime. The Turks enjoy preferential treatment, compared with Iran, when it comes to their image amongst the Syrian people, and in fact with the Arab peoples in general. Thus a change of regime in Syria may not impact Syrian-Turkish relations in the same way as it would affect Syrian-Iranian relations. In the words of Irshad Hormuzlu: “Turkey has nothing to fear from a change of regime, even in friendly states such as Syria; simply put, Ankara knows that

³⁵ See the interview with Arshad Hurmuzlu, the Turkish President's Senior Advisor for the Middle East Affairs: “We do not Fear the Toppling of the Regimes as the People are with us”, published in Beirut’s *Al Akhbar* May 25, ٢٠١١: www.al-akhbar.com/node/13287

³⁶ Ali Hussein Bakir, “Turkish-Iranian relations in the shadow of the Arab revolutions: A vision of the present and the future”, Aljazeera Centre For Studies, Doha, July 2011: www.aljazeera.net/mritems/streams/2011/7/4/1_1071856_1_51.pdf

³⁷ For details see: Ali H Bakeer, “The Determinants of the Turkish Position towards the Syrian crisis: The immediate dimensions and future repercussions”, *op. cit.*³⁷ Sibel Utku Bila, “Turkey to ratchet up pressure on Assad for reforms”, *The Daily Star*, p:9, 28/4/2011: www.dailystar.com.lb/Apr/28/Turkey-to-ratchet-up-pressure-on-Assad-for-reforms.ashx#axzz1ZeVnJGJl

³⁸ Sibel Utku Bila, “Turkey to ratchet up pressure on Assad for reforms”, *The Daily Star*, April 28, 2011: www.dailystar.com.lb/Apr/28/Turkey-to-ratchet-up-pressure-on-Assad-for-reforms.ashx#axzz1ZeVnJGJl

³⁹ - Oytun Orhan, *op.cit.*

- for more details: Abdullah Bozkurt, “Departure of Assad and Turkey’s role”, *Today's Zaman*, 19/8/2011: www.todayszaman.com/columnist-254309-departure-of-assad-and-turkeys-role.html

the Arab peoples look more positively towards the Turks and the Turkish role in the region, than their rulers do.”⁴⁰

III. Iranian and Turkish reactions: steps taken towards the Syrian regime

A. Iranian measures

Following the explicit declarations of the Iranian regime with regards to the Syrian revolution, and how it viewed these popular movements as a threat to the security and stability of the Syrian regime, the Iranian government worked to bolster the Assad regime in a number of ways. This was a three-pronged effort suited to fit the needs of the Syrians, in terms of public relations/media support; economic and political support; and military support.

Media and public relations support

A number of Iranian-supported media organizations, including a number which operate in Arabic, moved into action to combat the Syrian revolution. Their aims can be summarized as follows:

1. **De-legitimizing the Syrian revolt and casting aspersions about its associations with foreign powers:** These media outlets regularly refer to the Syrian rebels as terrorists and “agitators”, and repeatedly broadcast the confessions carried by Syrian official television, of rebels who confessed to being “agents of Israel.”⁴¹ This conforms to the pattern set by both the Persian-language and Arabic-language media outlets associated with the Iranian regime, which have attempted to link the Syrian uprising to the interests of Israel and the United States, or to paint the rebels as being Salafist radicals and terrorists. At other times, these Iranian-backed media outlets have sought to tie the Syrian rebels to various other protagonists within the region, such as the state security services of either Jordan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates, or to the sectarian Future Movement of Lebanon, led by Saad Hariri.⁴²
2. **Stirring the fears of minorities with regard to a post-Assad extremism:**⁴³ With the aid of the Syrian regime, these media outlets have worked to stir sectarian tensions

⁴⁰ See the interview with Hurmuzlu: “We do not Fear the Toppling of the Regimes as the People are with us”, (Arabic), *op. cit.*

⁴¹ Chris Whitman, Iran's Position On Syria Uprising, notes from amedinah, 19/4/2011: <http://notesfromamedinah.com/2011/04/19/irans-position-on-syrian-uprising/>

⁴² See the Hizbullah-backed www.almanar.com.lb/adetails.php?fromval=1&cid=83&frid=83&eid=32293

⁴³ Ziad Majed, “Fear”, *Now Lebanon*, 7 June, 2011: www.nowlebanon.com/arabic/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=279045

and intimidate Christians and Druze living in Syria with the specter of the rise of Sunni Muslim extremism. Within the Sunni Muslim community itself, these media use the idea of the Muslim Brotherhood and other extremists as a scare tactic [to drive away Sunni Muslim support for the rebellion]. In addition to this, these media have made use of the regional “Shia Factor” to help fan the flames of sectarianism⁴⁴.

3. **Spreading the conspiracy theory story and sowing confusion:** Those responsible for pro-Syrian regime make use of their well-honed skills in psychological warfare to promote the idea of a conspiracy being used to attack Syria. They do this by mixing half-truths together with outright lies and disinformation. Given the wide following which conspiracy theories have within the Arab world, this makes it easier for these pro-regime media to impact public opinion within the region and the wider world, taking away from what otherwise would have been popular support for the Syrian uprising. This in itself has been a success for the Syrian regime, which seems to be following the line “if you can’t beat them, confuse them”⁴⁵.

Economics

The economy is the weakest link in the Syrian regime’s chain. The protesters have been able to strike at this weak point through strikes, disruptions to work and closures, or through cooperation with foreign powers to impose economic sanctions on the regime. The paralysis of economic activity, including putting an end to the export and import of goods, might drive towards the toppling of the regime, or at least bringing the regime to its knees. This has come at a very critical time for the regime, which is in need of all the funds which it can obtain to maintain support for their supporters and party apparatchiks and for its military operations against Syrian citizens.⁴⁶

This reality was met with immediate, direct support from the Iranian regime; the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, pledged USD 3 billion in support for the Assad regime, just as the revolt was breaking out. This was followed by a further USD 9 billion in expedited, unconditional material support for the Syrian regime, to help the authorities combat the popular

⁴⁴ Osama Othman, “Bias and the Formation of Blocs in a Revolutionary Time”, *Elaph*, April 26, 2011: www.elaph.com/Web/opinion/2011/4/649605.html

See the statement delivered by Lebanese Maronite Patriarch al-Ra’i which has been widely condemned by Sunnis and Christians in Lebanon (with the exception of Christians supporting Syria, Iran as well as Hizbullah and Amal) <http://tayyarcana.org/articles/2011/0911/08091122.html>
www.nowlebanon.com/arabic/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=313160

⁴⁵ See special reports by the Hizbullah-backed *Al Manar* television station: “Secrets of the Syrian Crisis”, *op.cit.*

⁴⁶ See the author’s interview with Qatar’s *Al Arab* newspaper, May 31, 2011: <http://i3.makcdn.com/wp-content/blogs.dir/4872/files/2011/09/19.pdf>
<http://i3.makcdn.com/wp-content/blogs.dir/4872/files/2011/09/20.pdf>
<http://i3.makcdn.com/wp-content/blogs.dir/4872/files/2011/09/21.pdf>

revolt. These later funds will be disbursed to Syria over the first three months of 2012, in addition to 290,000 barrels of oil per day, free of cost.⁴⁷

In parallel to this, the Iranian regime has pressured another of its regional allies, the Maliki government of Iraq, into providing a further USD 10 billion of support for Damascus, which will be provided through the channels of existing and new economic agreements between Iraq and Syria, focused on the fields of Health, Commerce and Investment.^{*48} In fact, a total of USD 10 billion of deals covering the trade in natural gas between Syria, Iraq and Iran were signed in July of 2011.⁴⁹

Syria and Iraq held discussions in September of 2011 to examine ways of establishing a joint market; if implemented, this would turn Iraq into Syria's economic and trade lifeline, bringing the two countries closer together⁵⁰ and helping the Syrians overcome the burden of international sanctions.⁵¹

Military support

At the beginning of April, 2011, a number of analyses, published locally in Syria, in the wider region and also internationally, pointed to Iranian military support for Syria. Tehran supported its Syrian ally not only with combat weapons but also with surveillance equipment, including equipment for the surveillance of email traffic, mobile telephone conversations and social media interactions. Iran had deployed these technologies in the crack down on protests within their own country in 2009, with the Iranians developing an "electronic army" to track the opposition

⁴⁷ "Iran offers USD 9 billion in financial aid to help prevent the fall of Assad in Syria", *Green Experts Of Iran*, July 16, 2011:

<http://twitemail.com/email/245901604/11/Breaking-News%3A-Iran-offers--9-Billion-in-financial-aid-to-help-prevent-the-fall-of--Assad-in--Syria>

This despite the fact that Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki denied allegations of Iran exerting pressure on him, suggesting instead that he was grateful for Syria's assistance in preventing terrorists from entering Iraq's territory through the Syrian border

⁴⁸ "Iran Forces Maliki to Support Assad to the tune \$10 Billion", *Al Qanat*, 2 August, 2011:

<http://alqanat.com/news/shownews.asp?id=127072>

⁴⁹ "Iraq, Iran, Syria Sign \$10 billion Gas Deal", *Iraq-business news*, 25/7/2011:

www.iraq-businessnews.com/2011/07/25/iraq-iran-syria-sign-10-billion-gas-deal/

⁵⁰ Hazem Al Amin, "The New Iraq and Syria: The Iranian Choice, not the Turkish", *Al Hayat* newspaper, August 6, 2011:

<http://international.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/294830>

⁵¹ "Iraq's Large Market Saves Syria from Sanctions, a Third Time", *Al Arabiya Net*, September 26, 2011:

www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/09/26/168735.html

through the internet.⁵² News of such support coincided with announcements from the Turkish authorities that they had intercepted a shipment of Iranian weapons bound for Damascus.

A number of reports also discussed how Iranian anti-insurrection and internet and communications experts had been dispatched to provide the Syrian regime with the support it needed.⁵³ The Iranian opposition also reported on how the Iranian regime dispatched not only equipment, but also units of military, security and other experts trained in anti-insurgency techniques.

The Iranian “Group of Green Experts”, which had previously revealed the scale of Iranian financial support for the Syrian regime, also disclosed that Tehran had dispatched a unit of 65 members of the Revolutionary Guard (IRG), and four military cargo planes carrying weapons, and had landed them in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard’s own Ammar Air Base in Damascus, during an operation led by General Ibrahim Jabbari* of the *Vali Amr* (or “Guardian”) Unit of the IRG.⁵⁴

Iran agreed to finance the construction of a military base on the Syrian coast, and to help the development of a military complex at the site of the Lattakia Airport, which should be completed by the end of next year. In accordance with this agreement, in which Syrian Vice President for Security Affairs Mohammed Nasif Kheir Bek played a role, the aim of this step is to provide a “direct airlift” for the delivery of weapons and equipment which might be needed by the Syrian regime, without the need to have to go through a third party.⁵⁵

The United Nations would later report that Iran was violating international sanctions by sending weapons to Syria during the uprising there. The same report points out that six of the nine shipments had been intercepted; some of these were stopped by the Turkish authorities, with the first case of an intercepted weapons shipment being in March of 2011.⁵⁶

⁵² “How Iran Keeps Assad in Power in Syria”, *Op. Cit.*

⁵³ “U.S. Says Iran Helps Crackdown in Syria”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 14/4/2011:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704547804576261222747330438.html>

* For more information on the character of the head of the “Guardian Unit”, General Ibrahim Jabbari, see the Arabic link: January 27, 2011:

<http://arabic.iranbriefing.net/?p=718>

⁵⁴ “Deployed Army forces and equipment to Syria, Ammar Camp in Damascus”, Green Correspondents, May 17, 2011:

www.greencorrespondents.com/2011/05/blog-post_8615.html

⁵⁵ Iran agrees to fund Syrian military base, Iran Briefing, November 13, 2011:

<http://iranbriefing.net/?p=8309>

⁵⁶ Iran sending banned weapons to Syria, U.N. report says, CNN, May 12, 2011:

http://articles.cnn.com/2011-05-12/world/un.syria.iran.weapons_1_iranian-weapons-conventional-arms-report?s=PM:WORLD

B. Turkish measures

1. Hosting Syrian refugees

The Turkish authorities took the step, together with the Turkish Red Crescent, of setting up a refugee camp, a few kilometers on the inside of the Turkish-Syrian frontier. Turkey described this move as being born of the desire for good neighborly relations and the deep connections, including kinship and social relations, on both sides of the border, as well as being born of the Turkish government's humanitarian position. On April 29, the refugee camp accepted the first wave of 500 refugees, who were suffering very gravely, and many of whom had fled in such haste that they had had to leave their families behind.⁵⁷ This small nucleus of refugees would grow to 12,000 by the middle of June, 2011.⁵⁸

2. Hosting meetings of the Syrian opposition

Turkey laid the groundwork to receive and host the Syrian opposition. The first meeting of the Syrian opposition took place in Istanbul in April, 2011, at the invitation of Turkish civil society organisations, who wanted to examine more closely the changes taking place on the ground in Syria. This initial meeting in Turkey was followed by several more, including the "Syria Conference for Change" which took place in Anatolia. One of the positions adopted at this conference was the call to support the Syrian revolution and to call for the toppling of the regime. This was followed by the "Syrian National Salvation Conference", and later the Istanbul Conference of August, 2011, which paved the way for the convening of the opposition's Syrian National Council, which was born in Istanbul on October 2, 2011, as an umbrella organization for the Syrian opposition.⁵⁹ This body includes representatives of all political persuasions, and brings together members of the Syrian opposition both within the borders and abroad, with the aim of supporting the rebellion and the toppling of the regime and the establishment of a civic state within Syria.

For their part, the Turkish authorities dismissed Syrian claims that they were orchestrating these meetings, pointing out that they were obliged, by their own democratic system, to allow the freedom of association of any individuals, provided that these, in their turn, did not terrorism, extremism or violence. The birth of the Syrian National Council corroborates the Turkish version of events.⁶⁰ The Turkish government has further refuted that it was responsible for the division of

⁵⁷ GÖKÇE AYTULU, "Fleeing unrest, Syrians find shelter in southernmost district", *Hurriyet newspaper*, 19/5/2011: www.hurriyetdailynews.com/mob_nx.php?n=syrian-refugees-at-turkish-border-2011-05-19

⁵⁸ *Al Madina Newspaper*, June 29, 2011: www.al-madina.com/node/312596

⁵⁹ For details see the Founding Statement of the Syrian National Council in the UAE *Al Ettihad newspaper*, October 3, 2011: www.alittihad.ae/details.php?id=91002&y=2011

⁶⁰ Interview with Burhan Ghaliyoun, *Al Akhbar Newspaper* of Beirut, October 17, 2011:

power within the opposition organizations, an allegation leveled by some members of the opposition themselves in a bid to gain traction.⁶¹

There are historical precedents for Turkey to host meetings of the Iraqi opposition, as well as Palestinian groups, who made use of the freedom available to openly express their opinions without the call for violence⁶².

3. Confiscation of weapons

With the rise of the Syrian revolt, the Turkish authorities intensified the monitoring of their land and air borders with Syria, as well as their maritime ports, in a bid to prevent weapons and equipment reaching the Syrian regime which, it claimed, it was using to quell the popular rebellion. These efforts resulted in the interception by the Turkish authorities of a number of shipments of military hardware bound for Syria from Iran. During March of 2011, the Turkish authorities forced a number of Iranian airplanes to land which were flying over Turkish airspace⁶³ and then inspected them; during one of these operations, on March 19, 2011, the Turkish authorities impounded one of these planes, arresting its crew⁶⁴, and confiscated their contraband cargo of weapons.⁶⁵ These efforts were repeated on Turkey's land borders. In August of 2011, the Turkish Foreign Minister confirmed that the Turkish authorities had prevented shipments of weapons from Iran arriving to Syria, in contrast to earlier media reports from April of 2011, which had suggested that Turkey was not actively intercepting such weapons shipments.⁶⁶ It was Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan who declared in September that his country had intercepted a Syrian-flagged ship which was carrying arms and ammunition.⁶⁷

www.al-akhbar.com/node/23804

⁶¹ "Turkey 'does not carry the Sunni mantle' but Seeks to Balance out Iran's Influence in the Region", *Al Hayat*, London, July 24, 2011:

www.daralhayat.com/internationalarticle/290906

⁶² See interview with Arshad Hurmuzlu, the Turkish President's Senior Advisor for the Middle East Affairs, "We do not Fear the Toppling of the Regimes as the People are with us", (Arabic), *op. cit.*

⁶³ "Turkey forces Iranian plane to land, suspects cargo", *Today's Zaman*, 16/3/2011:

www.todayszaman.com/news-238349-turkey-forces-iranian-plane-to-land-suspects-cargo.html

⁶⁴ "Iranian plane's crew detained after 3-day-long search", *Dogan Haber Ajansi*, 22/3/2011:

http://www2.dha.com.tr/iranian-planes-crew-detained-after-3daylong-search-haber_149880.html

⁶⁵ "Turkey says seizes illegal Iran arms shipment", *Today's Zaman*, 31/3/2011:

www.todayszaman.com/news-239816-turkey-says-seizes-illegal-iran-arms-shipment.html

⁶⁶ "Iran Helps Assad Fight for Survival", *UPI*, August 9, 2011:

www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2011/08/09/Iran-helps-Assad-fight-for-survival/UPI-85041312903947/

⁶⁷ "Turkey says intercepted Syrian-flagged ship carrying arms", *Today's Zaman*, 23/9/2011:

www.todayszaman.com/news-257796-turkey-says-intercepted-syrian-flagged-ship-carrying-arms.html

4. Sanctions: freezing of funds, closing of borders and a weapons embargo

With the ceaseless attempts to arm the Syrian regime with the weapons to kill protesters, particularly on the part of the Iranian regime which made use of the Turkish-Syrian border ports as supply routes to Syria, the Turkish government imposed an arms embargo on the Syrian regime, and sealed off borders and ports between Turkey and Syria.⁶⁸ Turkish sanctions on the Syrian regime also included the financial assets of Syrian President Bashar al Assad and his family, as well as some companies which are associated with the Syrian President and other personages associated with the Syrian regime. According to the Sabah newspaper, the Turkish Financial Crimes Investigation Board, also known as MASAK, began to monitor the transactions of Syrian figures as well as companies known to be associated with al Assad, his family and his associates. Although there are no definite data on the scale of al Assad's finances, reports carried by the international press suggest that the Syrian President has between USD 450 million and USD 500 million of assets in Turkey.⁶⁹ Further, Turkey suspended the work of the joint Syrian-Turkish Supreme Council for Strategic Cooperation. This is a body which represents an agreement which extends to 51 Articles, covering a wide range of fields and bi-lateral relations.⁷⁰ Other sanctions being planned by the Turkish government include a ban on touristic travel for high-level Syrian officials, or for supporters of the Assad family, as well as a ban on commercial transactions with Syrian businessmen and businesses which support the Syrian regime, as well as measures being taken against the Syrian army; the financial services sector; sanctions on the energy sector. The stated aim of these measures is to impact the regime and not the people.⁷¹

IV. Signs of a cooling in Turkish-Iranian relations in response to the events

The difference in attitude and opinions between the governments in Tehran and Ankara towards the Syrian situation has led to a reality where the now-strained relations between Turkey and Iran could deteriorate to the level of a conflict (of some sort) in the future. What Iran has made patently clear with its actions is that it is simply not willing to give up on its strategic ally, even should such a position affect its relations with Turkey. This change in Turkish-Iranian relations was made clear by statements made by Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Mahman Parsat

⁶⁸ "Turkey seizes Syrian ship, announces arms embargo", *Sabah*, 26/9/2011:

www.sabahenglish.com/National/2011/09/26/turkey-seizes-syrian-ship-announces-arms-embargo

⁶⁹ "Ankara considers freezing Assad Family Assets in Turkey", *Turkey Today*, October 1, 2011:

<http://turkeytoday.net/node/5828>

⁷⁰ *Ibid*

⁷¹ See: "Expected Turkish Sanctions on Syria: The Aga Bank Project and the Oil and Gas Projects are Suspended", September 29, 2011:

www.aliqtisadi.com/index.php?mode=article&id=14920

during a press conference covering the dispute between Turkey and Iran over Syria: “If we had to choose between Turkey and Syria,” he said, “we would doubtless choose Syria.”⁷²

From the start of the revolt within the Syrian borders, there was a cooling off in the relations between Iran and Turkey. The reason for these strained relations stems from attacks by media networks associated with the Iranian regime, including those which broadcast in Arabic (such as Lebanon’s Al Manar Television, run by Hizbullah) and others, backed by the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (such as the Fars News Agency and the English-language Press TV), against the Turkish position towards the Syrian revolt. Some of these agencies accused the Turkish government of “duplicity” in “working to promote the Zionist and American agendas and unsettling the situation in Syria and the wider region.”⁷³ Other statements by these media have included the accusation that Turkey is arming and equipping terrorists and armed groups within Syria to de-stabilize the country, paving the way for a foreign military intervention which would meet Turkey’s ends.⁷⁴ Official and semi-official Iranian media have also promoted the idea that Turkey is supporting armed insurgents along the Turkish-Syrian frontier, particularly in the Jisr al Shughour district. Some of the headlines which have been run are along the lines of “Turkey Behind the Instability in Syria.”⁷⁵ Reports being published by this group of media also suggest that Turkey has been holding secret meetings with the Israelis to rebuild relations between the two sides.

The Al Manar website, associated with the Lebanese Iranian-backed group Hizbullah, also carried news of Iranian military threats against Turkey, with a special envoy for Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who warned Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that “the use of Turkish military bases in an attack on Syria would make Turkey liable to Iranian missile strikes”. This was followed by even more strongly worded statements from the Iranians, suggesting that Turkish support for the US in stirring up the popular protests in Syria would have “grave consequences” for Ankara.⁷⁶

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard had an unequivocal position on the Turkish role in the Syrian uprising, one which is in harmony with the stance of Iranian Supreme Leader. The *Subh Sadeq* newspaper, an organ of the Revolutionary Guard, ran an article with the headline “Iran’s Steadfast Position on Events in Syria”, which carried a number of threats towards Turkey,

⁷² Fars News Agency, July 20, 2011:

<http://arabic.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=9004290012>

⁷³ “Turkey Carries out America’s anti-Syrian Policies” ‘Fars News Agency July 13, 2011:

<http://arabic.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=9003230018>

⁷⁴ Ali Hussein Bakir, “Turkish-Iranian relations in the shadow of the Arab revolutions: A vision of the present and the future”, *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ Shayan Ghajar, “Iran and Turkey Divided over Syria”, *Inside Iran*, July 22, 2011:

www.insideiran.org/foreign-relations/iran-and-turkey-divided-over-syria/

⁷⁶ Ali Hussein Bakir, “Turkish-Iranian relations in the shadow of the Arab revolutions: A vision of the present and the future”, *op. cit.*

warning the country that Iran was firmly on the side of the Assad regime⁷⁷. The same article suggested that if Turkey were to continue with its present policy towards Syria, Iran would be driven to choose between its relations between the two countries; the choice which Iran would make, no doubt, is foretold. In the author's words, Ankara needs to understand a number of points about its present policy, including⁷⁸:

- Turkey would be mistaken to think that Syria is on the verge of disarray, or to think that it could stand to gain from the collapse of the Assad regime in its bid to realize its ambitions and dreams. From the Iranian point of view, the Syrian leadership is on the verge of resolving its problems: As soon as foreign interference is ended, this thinking goes, affairs will quickly return to normal.
- The Turkish government must realize that it will not be able to achieve its aims and ambitions outside of an alliance with Iran and Syria.
- The Iranian regime regards the protesters in Syria as being agents of Zionism and the United States. Proof of this can be found in the stated positions of these rebels with regards to Lebanese Hizbullah and to the "Resistance Camp" which takes in those countries opposed to US policies in the Middle East. There are indications, according to this article, that the protesters are in direct contact with the Zionists; it is not a coincidence, the author of the article claims, that these protests are taking place while the Israelis are occupying the Golan Heights. The litmus test for passing judgment on these "radicals", as the author of the article sees it, is their attitude towards Iran and Hizbullah.

Developments in the Kurdish question in Turkey followed quickly on the heels of these Iranian questions. The frequency of military operations carried out by the Kurdish Workers' Party (the PKK) in South Eastern Turkey. This lends credence to the view that the Iranians are providing these fighters with greater assistance and facilities, in a bid to use the PKK for leverage against Turkey, or at least that Tehran was looking the other way when it came to PKK operations. This seems especially likely given the attacks against Ankara carried for two days by the Iranian regime's media after the arrest, by the Iranians, of the PKK's Field Commander and second-in-command, Murat Karaylian [Deputy to imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan]. This announcement came alongside statements by the Head of the Iranian parliament's **Head of National Security and Foreign Policy Commission** of Majlis commission on National Security and Foreign Policy **Ala Eddin Boroujerdi**⁷⁹. Yet after Ankara had sent a special envoy to investigate the situation, the Iranian authorities made the clarification that they had not

⁷⁷ Persian version of the article is *Sohb Sadek*:

www.sobhesadegh.ir/1390/0508/M08.HTM

⁷⁸ The English version of the article which was published in a Revolutionary Guard publication:

"Iran Warns Turkey to Butt Out of Syria", *Iranian Diplomacy*, 26/7/2011

<http://irdiplomacy.ir/en/news/52/bodyView/14882/Iran.Warns.Turkey.to.Butt.Out.of.Syria.html>

⁷⁹ Markar Esayan, "Iran pulls the PKK card", *Today's Zaman*, 16/8/2011:

<http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist-253915-iran-pulls-the-pkk-card.html>

arrested Karaylian, but merely that they felt that Turkey should take that action [instead of intervening in Syria].⁸⁰

Iranian and Syrian media simultaneously carried reports of Ahmet Davutoglu receiving harsh criticism during one of his recent visits to Damascus⁸¹. Although Erdoğan attempted to tone down the level of rhetoric between his country and Iran, arguing that there was no real crisis between them, the Turkish government persisted in its slow but escalating approach against the Syrian regime. This developed into a new line on the question of Iranian intervention, whence the Turkish leadership began to state that “The Assad regime has been emboldened by [Iranian] support.” Erdoğan was thus formally asking Iran to cease its support for the Damascus regime which was viciously subduing protesters in Syria.⁸²

The Iranian response was to issue a series of threats, particularly after Turkey agreed to host part of the NATO missile defense system on its territory. Perhaps the most notable threat was made by the General Yahya Rahim Safavi, Military Counsel to the Iranian Supreme Leader, who called on Turkey to “fundamentally change its position on Syria”. The General further said that Turkey faced the choice of “re-examining its policies with regards to the missile defense system and its support for secularism in Islam, or face the consequences.”⁸³

V. Conclusion: The fate of the Syrian regime: repercussions on Iran and Turkey

A. In the event of the collapse of the Assad regime

Given that Syria is Iran’s bridgehead into the Arab countries, the fall of the Assad regime would severely affect Iran’s plans for the region. In such an eventuality, Iran would lose a strategic ally of long standing; regardless of what other benefits may accrue for Iran in such an event, it will not be able to recuperate the strategic loss of its ally. Iran stands to lose its link to the Lebanese group Hizbullah, which acts as the Islamic Republic’s right arm in Lebanon and the Middle East as a whole. Iran would thus lose its capacity to directly impact its sphere of influence, should this fall of the Syrian regime’s political and security apparatus in Lebanon. The same would be true, not only in Lebanon, but Iran’s influence would also be lost amongst the Palestinians.

Iran would lose its ability to “exploit” the Palestinian cause in a manner to which it has become accustomed, neither would it be able to make use of the Palestinian and Lebanese frameworks to

⁸⁰ ibid

⁸¹ Davutoglu treated to a barrage of criticism in Damascus: Comes Back a Disappointment to the Americans and Hariri, *Shamlife*, August 15, 2011:

www.shamlife.com/?page=show_det&select_page=11&id=5672

⁸² “Erdoğan says Turkey warned Iran about catering to Assad”, *Today's Zaman*, September 15, 2011:

www.todayszaman.com/news-256869-erdogan-says-turkey-warned-iran-about-catering-to-assad.html

⁸³ “Iran advisor slams Turkey”, *Hurriyet Daily New*, October 9, 2011:

www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=iran-advisor-slams-turkey-2011-10-09

win support amongst the [Arab] peoples. It could further unsettle the Iraqi regime; this, of course, would encourage the opposition Green Movement within Iran.

In short, Iran realizes that a rapid collapse of the Syrian regime would spell the end of the Iran's plans for the region as a whole; it would leave Iran watching as the repercussions and the shockwaves spread through its sphere of influence, perhaps reaching as far as Iran itself. This is what is driving the Iranian regime to take action on more than one level, in a bid to contain any potential losses and fortify its own defenses. Some of the most notable tactical steps taken by the Iranians have included:

- **Exerting influence on Iran's other spheres of influence:** In parallel to its unlimited support of the Assad regime, Iran has strengthened its influence on those Arab countries, namely Iraq and Lebanon. Iran makes use of these countries' resources and geopolitical weight in its efforts to bolster its own regional standing as well as its support of the Syrian regime, at a time of increased uncertainty in the wider Middle East.
- **Trying to contain any possible losses with new gains:** This rapid, intense effort to win over particularly those Arab countries which have seen revolts is patently obvious, notably in Egypt. There is no doubt that Egypt will be Iran's next target, and it now has a perfect opportunity to win Egypt over to its agenda, or at least to exploit Egypt's position of political and religious centrality within the Arab countries. Another option might be simply to ensure Egyptian neutrality in Iran's relations with the Arab States of the Gulf [in which Egypt might otherwise be expected to throw in its lot with the Arab States of the Gulf Cooperation Council].
- **Iran's smokescreen of rhetorical attacks against the Israelis:** The aim of this will be to bolster support for Tehran and its satellite state of the Syrian regime against the Syrian people⁸⁴. Iran's policy in this regard is to cynically make use of its support of the Palestinian cause and the resistance to Israeli hegemony. The increased level of Iranian rhetoric about its support for the Palestinians and the resistance has been noticed in the latest conferences which it hosted, such as the Islamic Awakening Conference⁸⁵ and the Conference in Support of Resistance⁸⁶ with the heightened participation of Palestinian Islamist resistance movements, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad at these meetings, and making use of their presence to serve their own agenda.

⁸⁴ See the statement by the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, Ali Larijani: Mehr News Agency, October 2, 2011:

<http://www3.mehrnews.com/ar/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1422020>

⁸⁵ Iran's official news networks covered the Islamic Awakening Conference:

<http://www.alalam.ir/news/697694>

<http://62.220.121.56/news/701014>

⁸⁶ The Iranian-sponsored "Conference in Support of the Resistance", and some of the Arabic language contributions to it:

- <http://www.alintiqad.com/essaydetails.php?eid=47741&cid=75>

- <http://www.abna.ir/data.asp?lang=2&Id=269242>

- <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/AC5DDE80-5D35-461A-8691-94EED942B62E.htm?GoogleStatID=9>

In contrast, it does not appear that Turkey will suffer from a possible collapse of the Syrian regime, so long as the destruction of the present regime does not lead to outright disarray. To repeat the statement of Hurmuzlu: “Turkey has nothing to fear from a change of regime, even in friendly states such as Syria; simply put, Ankara knows that the Arab peoples look more positively towards the Turks and the Turkish role in the region, than their rulers do.”⁸⁷ Turkey’s present efforts to support the Syrian revolution have ensured that they shall have positive, constructive relations with any new regime which could come to power in Syria.

B. In the event of the Assad regime remaining in power

While many observers believe that the fall of the Assad regime is only a question of time, we should still consider, if only theoretically, the possibility of the regime remaining in power: in such a situation, the results would be the complete opposite of those presented in the first scenario.⁸⁸ The geopolitical balance of powers would possibly shift in favor of the Iranians, in the short and medium terms. The Iranian-Syrian Axis would be in a position of power, allowing it to decide the nature of its relations with the other regimes in the region by imposing its own version of reality. This axis would then likely move from a position of defensiveness on the regional stage to a position of aggression, and thus target the two most crucial and effective countries currently operating in the region: Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

As far as the Iranian-Syrian alliance is concerned, Turkey has proven itself to be unreliable. Thus, the first step to be taken by them, should they emerge triumphant from their present crisis, would be to disentangle the geopolitical structures which presently allow Turkey to exert influence in the region, and to try to do away with the Turkish role, deeply unwanted by them. The chances of their success in doing so will depend primarily on the state of the Syrian regime after it emerges from its confrontation with the Syrian revolution, as well as the regional status of Iran at that time. This aim remains a feasible possibility, especially given that Turkey is fighting on many fronts: against the Israelis, against Syria and Iran, against the PKK as well as the situation it faces with Greek Cyprus. The choice will be for the Iranian-Syrian Axis to make. These two countries will likely make efforts to isolate Ankara within the region, and diminish the role of Turkey to the lowest possible level. Syria could potentially put a stop to Turkey’s burgeoning commercial activities in Palestine, Jordan and Lebanon. This would put an end to Turkey’s role as a regional mediator. Similarly, Iran would have the ability of blocking future Turkish involvement in Iraq, and from being involved in commercial activities in the GCC states, not to mention the ability of Iran to make use of the PKK against Turkey in this case.

⁸⁷ See the interview with Arshad Hurmuzlu, the Turkish President's Senior Advisor for the Middle East Affairs: “We do not Fear the Toppling of the Regimes as the People are with us”, published in Beirut’s *Al Akhbar*, *op. cit.*

⁸⁸ Ali Huseyin Bakir, “Dangers of Letting Assad Stay in Power”, *International Strategic Research Organization (USAK)*, Centre for Middle Eastern and African Studies, 6/9/2011: www.usak.org.tr/en/makale.asp?id=2303