

**THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF THE SYRIAN-IRANIAN ALLIANCE:  
POWER POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST 1979-1989**

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**Thesis submitted in satisfaction of the full requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in International Relations  
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**Summer Term 2002**

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THESES



## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title of thesis The Formative Years of the Syrian-Iranian Alliance:

Power Politics in the Middle East 1979-1989

### TEXT

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a comprehensive account and detailed 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 now lasted over twenty years, has proved to be an enduring feature of the political landscape of this troubled region. Moreover, since its inception, it has had a significant impact in terms of moulding events and bringing about major changes in the contemporary Middle East.

The thesis sets out to demonstrate that, contrary to prevailing views (due in large part to the authoritarian nature of the Syrian and Iranian regimes and their unpopularity in the West), the alliance between them has been essentially defensive in nature. It emerged in response to acts of aggression orchestrated by Iraq (1980) and Israel (1982), in both cases with the tacit support and prior knowledge of the United States. As a result of the research undertaken for this thesis, three distinct phases in the evolution and institutionalization of the Damascus-Tehran axis can be discerned. One chapter is devoted to each of these phases, constituting the three core sections of the thesis.

A brief introduction sets out to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the genesis and evolution of the Syrian-Iranian nexus. The first core chapter, covering the emergence of the alliance between 1979 and 1982, demonstrates that, while the initial impetus for the birth of the relationship came from the overthrow of Iran's conservative, pro-Western monarchy in 1979, the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980 served as a major catalyst in bringing Syria and Iran closer together, with Syria providing valuable diplomatic and military assistance to help Iran stave off defeat. The second core chapter covers the period between 1982 and 1985, when Israel launched an invasion of Lebanon and challenged Syria in its backyard. Here, Iran lent its support to Syria to drive out Israeli and Western forces during the period 1983-1985. The third core chapter deals with a critical, and perhaps the most problematic, phase in the development of the alliance. By the mid-1980's, both parties had developed conflicting agendas, contributing to tensions between them. However, continued consultations between the two allies, and their ability to prioritize their respective interests and redefine the parameters for cooperation, led by the late 1980s to the maturation and consolidation of their relationship. Finally, the conclusion looks at the reasons why the alliance lasted beyond the 1980's.



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## **Acknowledgements**

There are a number of individuals to whom I am greatly indebted for their generous support and input. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Fred Halliday, for his encouragement, patience and constructive critique of the various drafts that I submitted to him throughout the years. I am also grateful to Said Goudarznia, Nasser Majd, Mehrdad Khonsari, Eberhard Kienle and Mahmoud Delkhasteh for their guidance, and for enabling me to arrange several interviews. I owe a debt of gratitude to Patrick Seale, Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, Ahmad Mirfenderski, Richard Murphy and Ardeshir Zahedi for giving me their time, and sharing their knowledge and experiences. Furthermore, I benefited from the insight and information provided by Jafar Ra'ed, Abbas Sayghal, Hazim Sagiye, Ahmed Hashim, Safa Haeri, Dilip Hiro and others who prefer to remain anonymous due to the sensitive and controversial nature of my thesis topic. I am immensely appreciative of Andrew Brookes' efforts and diligence for proof reading the entire thesis. During my research, I profited from the newspaper archives at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, and would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the library staff for their professionalism and kind assistance. Finally, I would not have been able to complete this thesis had it not been for the unstinting support of my dear mother and sister, and my beloved wife, who maintained their confidence in me, and made the long and arduous process of completing this work much more bearable.

## INTRODUCTION

The study of alliances is central to the analysis of international relations. The formation of alliances among tribes, clans and small communities for security purposes dates back to the dawn of civilization. As several of the earliest civilizations emerged in the Fertile Crescent and the Nile River Valley, alliances have been a common feature on the political landscape of the Middle East for thousands of years, starting with the ancient empires of the Egyptians, Hittites, Assyrians and Persians.<sup>1</sup> The recurrent struggles involving the various regional powers, and later extra-regional actors such as 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 preceding and following 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 Arab defeat in the 1948-49 Palestine War at the hands of the newly-created state of Israel, the appeal of radical Arab nationalism and archaic political systems only served to exacerbate and polarize the situation. Furthermore, the region's vast oil reserves, and its geopolitical importance - lying at the crossroads between Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Indian subcontinent - increased the significance of the Middle East in the eyes of the Superpowers, leading to continued outside interference in the area. Concomitantly, many regional actors were eager to cultivate close ties with the Superpowers and to exploit the bipolar system in order to jockey for influence and aid to boost their own power and position, both in regional and international terms. Besides allying themselves with either Washington or Moscow, many states tried to enhance their security by forging alliances with other regional actors, at times to minimize foreign penetration of the Middle East.

In his landmark study on alliance theory and alliance formation in the Middle East, *The Origins of Alliances* (1987), Stephen M. Walt identified 33 different alignments in the region from 1955 to 1979 alone.<sup>2</sup> The general trend has been that regional actors have primarily aligned themselves in order to diminish a threat posed by another regional power or alliance. They have for the most part overcome ideological differences in recent decades to ally themselves if an immediate threat exists. Ideological factors assume some significance if they are not confronted with a major security challenge. In addition, the record clearly shows that they will align themselves with extra-regional actors that are willing to support their political objectives. Interestingly enough, ideological factors have been more salient in alliances between Middle Eastern states and their Superpower patrons - as the record during the Cold War era clearly demonstrated.

In the 1950's and 1960's, for the most part, conservative, pro-Western monarchies formed defense pacts to strengthen their position vis-à-vis radical, nationalist, republican governments which 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, diminishing the importance of ideology and regime structure in alliance formation, and eventually giving way to more pragmatic alignments against common threats. This was epitomized by the formation of the shortlived "Arab Triangle" consisting of Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia in the early 1970's, and its bid to demonstrate Arab dissatisfaction with the post-1967 status quo and US policy, by launching the 1973 October War. However, one of the most fascinating and enduring examples over the past two decades has been the emergence and evolution of the Syrian-Iranian alliance in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Subsequent to the overthrow of the Iranian monarchy, the new revolutionary Islamist regime and the secular, Arab nationalist government in Syria cultivated close bilateral relations and eventually aligned themselves with each other in response to direct challenges posed to them by Iraq, Israel and the United States in the Levant and Persian Gulf between 1980 and 1988.

The genesis and evolution of the Syrian-Iranian axis during its first decade was one of the most intriguing developments in modern Middle East politics. During the turbulent decade of the 1980's, 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 alignment, or describe it as a marriage of convenience that would dissolve rapidly. Pointing to many differences in their respective ideologies, as well as their social and political foundations, most analysts expressed surprise as to how a revolutionary, pan-Islamic theocracy such as Iran could ally itself with a secular, pan-Arab socialist republic like Syria.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, while Ba'thi 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 rejected the concept of the nation-state.<sup>4</sup> In addition, in the sphere of relations with the Superpowers, although Syria traditionally maintained strong ties with the Soviet Union, and was a primary recipient of Soviet military assistance in the 1980's, Moscow's relations with Tehran's ruling clerics were strained intermittently after the establishment of the Islamic Republic.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a detailed 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 these two states, which has now lasted over twenty years, has proved to be a persisting feature on the political landscape of this troubled region. Moreover, since its inception, it has had a significant impact in terms of moulding events and bringing about major changes in the contemporary Middle East.

This thesis sets out to demonstrate that, contrary to prevailing views (due in large part to the authoritarian nature of the Syrian and Iranian regimes, and their unpopularity in the West and in certain parts of the Arab world), the alliance between them has been essentially defensive in nature, 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 United States. As a result of the research undertaken for this study, three distinct phases in the evolution and institutionalization of the Damascus-Tehran axis can be discerned. One chapter is devoted to each of these stages, constituting the three core sections of the thesis.

This brief introduction sets out to provide a general conceptual framework for understanding the genesis and longevity of the Syrian-Iranian nexus. The first chapter, covering the emergence of the alliance between 1979 and 1982, seeks to demonstrate that, while the initial impetus for the birth of the relationship came from the overthrow of Iran's conservative, pro-Western monarchy in 1979, the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980 served as a major catalyst in bringing Syria and Iran closer together, with Syria providing valuable diplomatic and military assistance to help Iran stave off defeat. The second core chapter covers the period between 1982 and 1985, when Israel launched its second invasion of Lebanon and challenged Syria in its backyard. Here, Iran lent its support to Syria, in part by mobilizing Lebanon's Shi'ites, to drive out Israeli and Western forces during the period 1983-1985. The third core chapter deals with a critical, and perhaps the most problematic phase in the development of the alliance. By 1985, the two allies had developed conflicting agendas, therefore contributing to tensions between them. However, continued bilateral consultations, and their ability to prioritize their respective objectives (without impinging on the interests of the other), and to redefine the parameters of cooperation, led to the maturation and consolidation of their relationship by the late 1980's. Finally, the conclusion looks at the reasons why the alliance has lasted beyond the 1980's.

Although two studies in recent years, *Syria and Iran: Rivalry and Cooperation*, by Hussein J. Agha and Ahmad S. Khalidi (1995), and *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System*, by Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch (1997) shed light on certain aspects of the alliance between the two countries, they focus primarily on its continued importance in the post-Cold War era, and provide a general overview of the formative years of the Tehran-Damascus nexus. This thesis aims to serve as an in-depth study, tracing the origins and development of the strategic partnership between Damascus and Tehran from the toppling of Mohammad Reza Shah in early 1979 to Syrian-Iranian intercession to halt Amal-Hezbollah clashes in Beirut and the end of the First Persian Gulf War in mid-1988. Besides putting forth an empirical survey with a chronology of events, the analytical content is intended to distinguish the three phases in the evolution of the alliance and their significance, in terms both of how they affected bilateral relations between the two states, and of their regional implications in the volatile environment of 1979-1988.

With regard to the research methodology and material used, this thesis relies primarily on secondary sources (books, periodicals, newspapers), along with transcripts of radio broadcasts, official government statements, and also on personal interviews with former government officials and Middle East experts. In view of the closed and often secretive nature of the Syrian Ba'thi and Iranian Islamist regimes and their decision making, coupled with the importance and sensitivity of cooperative ties between them, it is highly improbable that responsible officials would have engaged in frank discussions on these matters or provided first-hand knowledge about their bilateral relations. Indeed, inaccessibility to primary sources and interviews with current government officials in Damascus and Tehran continue to be the main obstacles to providing 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 key figures and bodies in the Syrian and Iranian regimes, including the role, importance and views of the various leaders and councils, along with limited information on their bilateral consultations, pose a formidable challenge to any outsider attempting to understand the inner workings of these two authoritarian governments and the Syrian-Iranian relationship. Due to the aforementioned problem, this study tries to compensate for this serious limitation through an exhaustive survey and analysis of the available secondary sources, and also attempts to fill in some of the apparent 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 the extent of Syrian military assistance to Iran in the early years of the Iran-Iraq hostilities (1980-1981) and Tehran's policy toward the Syrian Muslim Brethren, and former US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy's insight on the degree of Syrian-Iranian involvement in attacks on American assets in Lebanon between 1983-1984.

Since this study focuses primarily on the genesis and development of the Tehran-Damascus nexus during its first decade, one may come away with the impression that the maintenance and augmentation of their strategic bilateral links was the first and foremost foreign policy consideration on the minds of Syrian and Iranian leaders between 1979-1989. In some respects and in certain instances, this was definitely the case for both partners, especially for Iran. The seizure of the American embassy in Tehran by Iranian militants 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 Ayatollah Khomeini's regime was extremely dependent on Hafez Assad's diplomatic and military support. This was needed in order to stave off defeat and to 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 Shi'ites to expel Israeli and Western forces from its backyard between 1982-1985. As the Israeli threat receded with the withdrawal of Tel Aviv's troops to the self-declared security zone by mid-1985 and Arab disenchantment grew due to Iran's persistence in continuing the Gulf War, Iran once again became more dependent on Syrian cooperation and goodwill in order to maintain its foothold in the Levant and avoid total regional isolation. This continued to be the case until the cessation of hostilities with Iraq in 1988. Overall, Tehran valued its strategic alliance with Syria more between 1979-1982 and 1985-1988, particularly in the backdrop of the poor state of US-Iranian relations throughout the 1980's and the erratic nature of its ties with the Soviet Union and Western Europe during this period. For Syria, the three years from 1982 to 1985 represented the height of its reliance on Iran in order to undo the achievements of its foes in Lebanon. Concomitantly, on the international level, Syria continued to put great emphasis on its close links with the Soviet Union during the first half of the 1980's due to the latter's Superpower status and in its capacity as the primary provider of military and economic assistance to Syria. However, with the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 and the gradual cooling of Soviet-Syrian relations in the second half of the 1980's, a subtle shift occurred

in Syrian perceptions of Moscow. Damascus realized that it would have to diversify its political and economic ties internationally, and in concurrence, rely more heavily on regional allies and proxies such as Iran and Lebanon's Shi'ites to achieve its strategic and military objectives and to keep Israeli and Iraqi power in check. While this study's main focus is the evolution of the Syrian-Iranian alliance, it also attempts to put the bilateral relationship within the proper context of the changing regional and international environment during the 1980's, and how both Syrian and Iranian policymakers viewed the evolving situation around them and how they tried to utilize their strategic partnership to achieve their objectives.

This thesis highlights the fact that during 1980-1981 and 1986-1987 there were differences of opinion within the Iranian leadership about the extent and utility of cooperative ties with Syria, and also that Rifat Assad had serious reservations about the strategic alliance with Iran by 1984. However, it does not concentrate on domestic factors such as the views of various officials, the impact of internal political developments and domestic public opinion about the Syrian-Iranian axis between 1979-1989 for three major reasons. First and foremost, based on the available evidence, it is clear that throughout the 1980's most of the key political decision makers in Tehran and Damascus firmly believed that perpetuating and strengthening the alliance was a centerpiece in their foreign policy. Secondly, as previously mentioned, in view of the opaque nature of decision making within the two regimes, even today, it is highly problematic to ascertain and reveal the true opinions of various members of the Syrian and Iranian leadership about their alliance during its first decade. Whenever there were major rifts and differences of opinion about their bilateral relations, these ultimately manifested themselves in some form in their domestic or regional policies, and are mentioned in this study, based on press accounts that appeared at the time in the Arab and Western media. Thirdly, the existing evidence and the authoritarian nature of the Syrian Ba'thi and Iranian Islamist systems clearly indicate that domestic opinion was never considered to be a prime factor when Syrian and Iranian leaders decided about major issues affecting their bilateral ties. In fact, it was a non-issue, particularly for the Syrian government. In spite of the unpopularity among the Syrian Ba'th Party and the Syrian masses of the policy to support Iran during its eight-year war with Arab Iraq, Hafez Assad and his inner political circle did not feel obliged to alter their position in order to gain Party approval or win domestic support.<sup>6</sup> With regard to Iran, after the Islamist regime began oil deliveries to Syria and also expelled the Iraqi army from much of Iranian 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-1980's, with Syria failing to make timely payments for its oil purchases and the acute economic situation in Iran, some members of the Iranian parliament became quite vocal in their opposition to continued shipments and even the logic of alliance with Syria. However, in the final analysis, despite some tensions in bilateral relations, Ayatollah Khomeini and his lieutenants would not be swayed, and were determined to preserve links with their only significant Arab ally.<sup>7</sup> Such is the nature of authoritarian, doctrinaire regimes. Overall, the emphasis of this thesis lies in the output and policies that emerged from the black box of Syrian-Iranian decision making.

In general, a wealth of information and analysis about the evolution of the Syrian-Iranian alliance during its first decade exists. Through careful research and study, this thesis attempts to put the various pieces together, to provide insight, and to shed new light on crucial events and decisions that were made in Tehran and Damascus during one of the most turbulent periods in the contemporary history of the Middle East. These include: the impact of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982, and the outcome of the Syrian-Iranian consultations that ensued on Tehran's decision to invade Iraq in the weeks that followed; and secondly, how US-Iraqi 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 Hezbollah in its 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 consequently 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'thi Syria. Firstly, 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 therefore more viable.<sup>8</sup> In the words of Holsti, Hopmann, and Sullivan, "The smaller the alliance, the more cohesive and effective it is, and the more important the contribution of each member."<sup>9</sup> Secondly, it has primarily been a defensive alliance aimed at neutralizing Iraqi and Israeli offensive capabilities in the Gulf and Near East respectively, and thwarting American encroachment in the Middle East. In general, alliances which have set and limited objectives are more stable and durable.<sup>10</sup> According to George Liska and Stephen M. Walt, defensive alliances are 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.<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, the priorities of the two partners differ in the two arenas where they cooperate. For Iran, the Gulf region is the main area of concern, whereas for Syria, the Levant is the primary focus of its attention. Over time, through continuous consultations and modification of 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 concurrently furthering their own interests.<sup>12</sup> In other words, between 1985 and 1988 Iran finally acknowledged that Syrian interests took precedence in the Arab-Israeli theater, and Syria in return deferred to its Iranian ally when vital matters regarding Gulf security were at stake for the Islamist government. Although not all their interests converged, through continuous consultations, Tehran and Damascus gradually harmonized their positions so that their interests would complement one another to the degree possible. As George Liska posits in *Nations in Alliance*, the more complementary the interests of alliance members, the more easily intra-alliance compromises can be achieved.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the fact that Syria has carried the greater part of the burden in checking Israeli power, while 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 fulfill



different functions, consequently reinforcing the rationale and utility of their strategic links. In other words, the more pronounced the differentiation of functions of the members, the greater the cohesion of the alliance.<sup>14</sup> Fourthly, the mere fact that the alliance has endured for so many years (especially by the standards of the Middle East) gives it considerable weight and importance. Interestingly enough, Robert L. Rothstein argues in *Alliances and Small Powers*, "Once an alliance has been created, there is positive value placed on continuing it, even if it seems to perform very few functions."<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Morton A. Kaplan builds on this point by postulating that longstanding alliances are characterized by greater unity and legitimacy.<sup>16</sup> It is also noteworthy that when an alliance has become institutionalized, if a member wishes to abandon it, it is more prudent to find another viable arrangement that has at least equal utility. In other words, it will pay an opportunity cost unless it joins or forges some form of alternate arrangement that is at least equal in utility to the previous alliance.

Finally, another general point needs to be made with regard to the role of ideology in the maintenance of the alliance. Ironically, an extremely crucial factor in the longevity of the Syrian-Iranian axis is that both states have differing ideologies. Herein lies the paradox. Quite often, alliances between states which espouse the same transnational, universalistic ideology are less likely to endure than those where ideology plays a minimal role. This has been particularly true in the Middle East, where authoritarian regimes predominate and frequently use ideology as a tool to boost their political legitimacy and support base both domestically and in neighboring countries. Revisionist ideologies such as pan-Arabism and Islamic fundamentalism have frequently been quite divisive since they have been used to project power and influence and destabilize rival states. In the Middle East, the record clearly shows that states sharing a common ideology have competed for the mantle of leadership rather than form durable alliances. Each state may claim to be the legitimate leader, and demand that others 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 1950's and 1960's involving Nasserite Egypt and the radical regimes in Syria and Iraq. Stephen M. 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 extremely unstable and shortlived. 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.<sup>17</sup> Fred C. 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.<sup>18</sup>

When one studies the case of the Syrian-Iranian alliance, it is apparent that Iran - a non-Arab nation - is not attempting to be a champion of Arab nationalism like its Syrian partner, that considers itself "the beating heart of Arabism." Syria for its part is not vying for leadership of 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'thi regime in Damascus during the early 1980's. In general, there has been no ostensible competition on the

ideological level (except in Lebanon during 1985-1988), nor fear that one partner might upstage the other, precisely because of their distinctly different ideological platforms. According to Herbert S. Dinerstein, ideological dissimilarities will not disrupt alliance cooperation if none of the members is intent on political revolution in the others.<sup>19</sup>

Both Ba'thi Syria and Islamic Iran have been fiercely independent states and, through 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 American 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 1982-1985, Syrian President Hafez 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 also 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.

In the following chapters it will be demonstrated 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 Ronald 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 the regional designs of Saddam Hussein and Menachem Begin. Careful, well-crafted strategies eventually led to the expulsion of the Iraqi army from Iranian territory by 1982, the withdrawal of American troops from Beirut in 1984, and the retreat of Israeli forces from most of the Lebanese territory they occupied by 1985. At the same time, in spite of their impressive achievements, there were limits to 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 Soviet Union, they were unable to alter the regional status quo in their favor and determine the outcome of events on their own in the Levant and the Persian Gulf. Although the Syrian-Iranian axis possessed limited offensive capability in regional terms, let alone on the international level, nonetheless, it was a force to be reckoned with during the 1980's - one that has left an enduring mark on Middle East politics at the end of this century.

#### ENDNOTES

1. For the purpose of this thesis, I have adopted Stephen Walt's working definition of an alliance, which he describes as "a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states." See Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 1.

2. Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, pp. 150-151.

3. See Yair Hirschfeld, "The Odd Couple: Ba'thist Syria and Khomeini's Iran," in *Syria Under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*, ed. Avner Yaniv and Moshe Ma'oz (New York: St.

Martin's Press, 1986), p. 105, and Shireen T. Hunter, "Syrian-Iranian Relations: An Alliance of Convenience or More?" *Middle East Insight*, June/July 1985, pp. 30-31.

4. Hirschfeld, p. 105. In his well-known work, *Kashf-e Asrar*, published in 1944 during the Second World War, Khomeini criticized the contemporary international system, and stated his belief that the concept of the nation-state was inherently flawed. From his perspective, modern states were "the products of man's limited ideas." Instead, he advocated Islamic universalism, calling for the establishment of Islam on every corner of the earth. See also R. K. Ramazani, "Khumayni's Islam in Iran's Foreign Policy," in *Islam in Foreign Policy*, ed. Aaded Dawisha (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 16-20.

5. *Ibid.*, and Hunter, p. 31.

6. See also Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 64 and 97-98.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

8. See Edwin H. Fedder, "The Concept of Alliance," *International Studies Quarterly*, 12, No. 1 (1968), p. 83.

9. For more details, see Ole R. Holsti, P. Terrence Hopmann, and John D. Sullivan, *Unity and Disintegration in International Alliances* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1985), pp. 21, 56-57.

10. See Herbert S. Dinerstein, "The Transformation of Alliance Systems," *American Political Science Review*, 59, No. 3 (1965), p. 599.

11. George Liska, *Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), pp. 39-40, and Stephen M. Walt, "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," *Survival*, Spring 1997, p. 159.

12. George Liska argues that consultations strengthen alliance cohesion since they reinforce solidarity and equality among the members. George Liska, *Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence*, p. 69. James Loomis posits that greater communication enhances the feeling of trust, and brings about cooperation. Moreover, Ernst Haas and Allen Whiting state that the key factors in alliance maintenance are continuous consultation and adjustment of policies. See James L. Loomis, "Communication, the Development of Trust and Cooperative Behavior," *Human Relations*, 12, No. 4 (1959), p. 305, and Ernst B. Haas and Allen S. Whiting, *Dynamics of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), p. 178.

13. Liska, *Nations in Alliance*, p. 82.

14. See J.R.P. French, "The Disruption and Cohesion of Groups," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 36, No. 4 (1941), pp. 365-366.

15. Robert L. Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 119.

16. Morton A. Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1957), pp. 108-109.

17. See Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, pp. 35-36, 206-212. and also "Why Alliances Endure or Collapse," p. 163.

18. Fred C. Iklé, *How Nations Negotiate* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 236.

19. Herbert S. Dinerstein, "The Transformation of Alliance Systems," p. 592.

## THE EMERGENCE OF THE SYRIAN-IRANIAN AXIS: 1979-1982

### INTRODUCTION

The 1979 Iranian revolution was undoubtedly one of the most important milestones in modern Middle Eastern history. Not only did the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty bring about major changes within Iran, but it also ushered in a new era of politics on the regional level. The new regime under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini 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 1978-1979 sent tremors throughout the region, the Arab world in particular. While it alarmed many regimes which had previously enjoyed close ties with the imperial government, it was enthusiastically welcomed by many non-aligned and pro-Soviet governments. Moreover, it also gave a major boost and served as a powerful source of inspiration for various Islamic, Third World, and revolutionary movements and political parties in the region and beyond.

A natural outcome of the toppling of the Pahlavi throne was the reversal in the pattern of Iran's alliances and enmities. With one major stroke, the country's new leadership terminated Iran's long-standing alliances with the United States and Israel. Consequently (although not inevitably), Iran's relations 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.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the fall of the Shah, most Arab governments viewed the existing political order in the Middle East as a predominantly Arab one. Non-Arab actors such as Israel and Iran were constricted and played a marginal role in mainstream Arab politics. This was particularly true in the heydays of Arab nationalism in the 1950's and 1960's, during the Nasser era. Tel Aviv and Tehran both perceived radical Arab nationalism as a major threat to their national security and existence. They therefore aligned themselves to counter the "progressive Arab Front" under Nasser's leadership. However, 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 marked 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 put less emphasis on the role of ideology and made realpolitik a hallmark of their diplomacy in the decade that followed.

By the time the revolt against the monarchy erupted in Iran, the Arab political order was in a state of disarray and weakness. The failure to derive any tangible benefits from the limited success of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the impasse with the Palestinian issue, 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. The ideology of revolutionary Iran and its new foreign policy posture posed important challenges and opportunities for a number of Arab regimes (depending on their structure and orientation), particularly Iraq and Syria. Consequently, the interplay between the events unfolding in the Arab world and Iran 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 the bloodiest and longest war in modern Middle Eastern history. Concomitantly, the conflict transformed the emerging Syrian-Iranian entente into a formal alliance - probably one of the most durable regional alliances - which has lasted to this day, despite all odds and predictions to the contrary.

With the outbreak of the First Persian Gulf War on September 22, 1980, many observers expected Syrian President Hafez Assad to join the many other Arab leaders who rallied to aid Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein in his effort to deliver a major blow against non-Arab Iran and blunt the intrusive edge of its Islamic revolution.<sup>2</sup> At the very least it would have been expected that Assad would declare his neutrality, because of the recent rupture 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. Indeed, Damascus could have opted to avoid having enemies on both its eastern and western flanks in view of its precarious regional position. Such expectations were partly based on the structural and ideological similarities between Assad's and Hussein's regimes. Both leaders had risen to power in military coups orchestrated by the Ba'th Party in their respective countries, and espoused a pan-Arab, socialist ideology. However, to the dismay of many, the war led to the consolidation of the emergent Syrian-Iranian axis by 1982.

There has been a great deal of debate among scholars and analysts concerning the motivations which prompted Damascus and Tehran to seal this so-called "unholy alliance" by the spring of 1982. Many observers have reduced the reasons behind this peculiar partnership to one primary negative interest, namely their common enmity with Iraq.<sup>3</sup> Although there is no doubt that their mutual animosity towards Baghdad provided major impetus for the formation of the Tehran-Damascus axis, it would be a gross oversimplification to consider their enmity with Ba'thi Iraq as the only important factor which contributed to the development of the Syrian-Iranian connection. Careful analysis would reveal 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.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an accurate chronology of events, and in-depth analysis of the chain of events and the forces which moulded and influenced the beginnings and eventual formalization of the relationship between the winter of 1979 and the 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-1970's, their relations had fluctuated between outright hostility and cold peace throughout much of the 1960's and 1970's. Pahlavi Iran perceived Ba'thi Syria as a menace in the region, due to its close ties with the Soviet Union and its support for radical Arab movements. Moreover, Syria's vociferous claims that the Iranian province of Khuzestan (historically and more accurately known as Arabestan by the Arabs) was "an integral part of the Arab nation" because of its indigenous Arab population, and about the "Arab character" of the Gulf, greatly disturbed Iranian officials.<sup>4</sup> The Shah perceived radical Arab nationalism as a major threat to Iran's regional interests and national security.

For Syria's Ba'thi leaders (who first seized the reins of power in 1963), imperial Iran was a primary source of instability in the Middle East, and a dangerous enemy of the Arab nation. They resented the Shah's close ties and cooperation with Israel and conservative pro-Western Arab regimes. From their perspective, the Shah served as an instrument of American imperialism in the region by thwarting Arab aspirations and, more specifically, impeding efforts to liberate Palestine from the Zionists.

One of the most striking and recurrent features in the modern history of Syrian-Iranian relations (since full diplomatic relations were established in 1946) was that the improvement or deterioration of bilateral ties was to a significant degree a function of the state of Syrian-Iraqi and Iranian-Iraqi relations, and of the regional environment at the time.<sup>5</sup> This was evident in the mid-1950's, but became more pronounced following the creation of the United Arab Republic in February 1958.<sup>6</sup> 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 regarding their common borders and other issues. Indeed, Iranian-Iraqi relations improved noticeably during the period February-July 1958, prior to the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy.<sup>7</sup>

In July 1960, UAR President Nasser severed diplomatic ties with Iran, after a controversial statement made by the Shah at a press conference, indicating that Iran had already recognized Israel.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it came as no surprise that, after Syria seceded from the UAR in September 1961, the Shah welcomed this event and moved to restore full diplomatic relations with the new government in Damascus.<sup>9</sup> However, following the Ba'thi seizure of power in Iraq and Syria during the period 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.<sup>10</sup> In spite of the collapse of this initiative by mid-1963, Iran remained uneasy as the Syrian and Iraqi Ba'this subsequently initiated steps to create a union between their two countries.<sup>11</sup> This process came to an abrupt end as the Iraqi Ba'th was ousted by Abd al-Salam Arif in November 1963.

It is noteworthy that subsequent to the Cairo summit of January 1964, as Baghdad and Cairo drew closer and strengthened political and military cooperation, Iraq's relations with Syria and Iran deteriorated.<sup>12</sup> Both Nasser and Arif were dismayed by the fact that the Syrian Ba'th seemed to be strengthening its grip on power and stabilizing the situation.<sup>13</sup> The Syrian Ba'this for their part

feared being trapped between a "hammer and anvil" and launched an intensive propaganda war against Arif.<sup>14</sup> In concurrence, the Syrian news media ceased attacks on Iran.<sup>15</sup> Damascus seemed to have modified its policy towards Tehran in order to avoid needlessly alienating it, in view of the emergent Iraqi-Egyptian alliance. Both Damascus and Tehran must have been 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.<sup>16</sup>

Although there was never a marked improvement in Syrian-Iranian relations, by 1965 significant shifts had occurred in the triangle encompassing Syria, Iraq and Iran. As the Shah and Arif tried to ease tensions and reach some sort of modus vivendi in the Gulf region, Syrian-Iranian relations plunged to unprecedented lows as the militant Ba'thi government of Prime Minister Yusuf Zu'ayyin, in an unprecedented move, called for the "liberation" of Arabestan from "Iranian occupation" and printed official maps designating it as part of the Arab homeland.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

There was a relative improvement in bilateral relations in the aftermath of the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war, when Iran's Red Lion and Sun Society (renamed the Red Crescent Society after the 1979 revolution) sent medical personnel and humanitarian aid to assist Syrian wounded and refugees displaced by the fighting.<sup>19</sup> While diplomatic relations were upgraded to the chargé d'affaires level, and trade links improved, there were intermittent tensions. By 1969, the situation had degenerated once again as the Syrians uncovered an Iranian espionage network in their country, and the number of staff in their respective embassies was reduced.<sup>20</sup>

During Black September in 1970, as the Jordanian-Palestinian confrontation erupted, leading to military intervention by the Syrians and Israelis in Jordan, Iran sent munitions and weapons shipments for the Jordanian army.<sup>21</sup> In addition, the Shah served as a intermediary 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.<sup>22</sup> Following Hafez Assad's successful coup in November 1970, there was 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 June 30, 1973.<sup>23</sup>

Bilateral relations between Syria and Iran improved somewhat during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and its aftermath. During the conflict, Iran provided logistical, medical and non-military assistance to the Arab combatants.<sup>24</sup> In the period that followed the war, Iran gave some financial assistance and relations warmed up to some degree.<sup>25</sup> Less than two months after the cessation of hostilities, in December 1973, the process of upgrading relations to the ambassadorial level began with a new Iranian ambassador being appointed to Damascus.<sup>26</sup> In 1974, as a consequence of 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.<sup>27</sup> High-level exchanges between the two erstwhile foes continued, and in 1975 Iran gave an additional US\$ 300 million in loans to Syria.<sup>28</sup> 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 the country. He was also determined to prevent being outmaneuvered by the Iraqis, who had concluded the Algiers Accord with Iran in March 1975, and were in the process of mending fences with their Persian neighbor.<sup>29</sup> Assad's four-day state visit (December 28-31, 1975) paved the way for further ministerial-level exchanges to expand political, economic and cultural ties between the two countries.<sup>30</sup> However, this process could be best described as a limited rapprochement.

In view of the warming of Egyptian-American relations, Sadat's decision to pursue a separate peace with Israel, and the Shah's close ties with both Cairo and Washington, Assad had hoped to convince the Shah to use his influence in order to convince 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.<sup>31</sup> The Shah instead encouraged Anwar Sadat's peace initiative towards Israel.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, by the late 1970's the rift between Tehran and Damascus had become seemingly irreparable. It was therefore quite understandable, when the Shah was deposed in February 1979, that Assad considered the change in government to be 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 motivation to establish close links with the new clerical regime can be partially understood within the context of the forces at play in inter-Arab and internal Syrian politics. Assad's bitter and frustrating experiences in dealing with other Arab states between 1973 and 1979 prompted him to re-evaluate his regional policies by 1979-1980.<sup>33</sup> The Syrians had been outraged by Egypt's betrayal in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, and her 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.<sup>34</sup> 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, thus resolving the border disputes between the two countries, and signifying Baghdad's implicit recognition of Iranian superiority in the Persian Gulf region.<sup>35</sup> With her eastern borders and her outlet to the Gulf now secure, in April 1976, after having failed to reach an agreement over transfer fees with the Syrians (for the export of Iraqi oil through the trans-Syrian pipeline), Iraq informed Damascus that she would halt her oil-pumping operations via the trans-Syrian pipeline. The Iraqi decision translated into huge financial losses for the Syrian regime, which helplessly watched the deterioration of economic and political conditions at home, and the decline of its power and prestige abroad.<sup>36</sup>

Damascus' sense of isolation was further compounded by the evolution of the Saudi-Iranian-Egyptian axis with the blessing of Washington, Sadat's historic visit to Jerusalem in November 1977, and the Camp David Accords in March 1979.<sup>37</sup> Even during the Arab summit held in Baghdad in response to the warming Israeli-Egyptian relationship, in an effort to create a united Arab front

against Egypt, Syria was left on the sidelines and, to her disappointment, witnessed the formation of the Saudi-Iraqi-Jordanian entente.<sup>38</sup>

Between October 1978 and July 1979, however, a rapprochement between Syria and Iraq seemed to be a distinct possibility.<sup>39</sup> The effort for reconciliation was partially motivated by the need to forge a credible military alliance to keep Israeli power in check on the western front, thereby relieving Syria of some of the pressure, and to bolster the position of Iraq, which was not at ease with the chaos and turmoil in neighboring Iran and its potential impact on the Shi'ite population within her own borders.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, the Syrian-Iraqi partnership did not 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'thi regime in Baghdad, despite Syrian denials.<sup>41</sup> Damascus once again found itself isolated and placed in a very vulnerable position vis-à-vis Israel and a hostile Iraq. It was therefore no surprise that by 1979-1980 the betrayals and disappointments of the past had done away with any lingering Syrian hope or idea about the wisdom of relying on fellow Arabs.<sup>42</sup> Hafez Assad subsequently continued to cultivate even closer relations with the new revolutionary government in Tehran and watched events unravel in Iran with great interest.

#### **THE INITIAL PHASE OF THE SYRIAN-IRANIAN RAPPROCHEMENT (FEBRUARY - JULY 1979)**

Immediately after the collapse of the monarchical regime, Assad sent Khomeini a telegram on February 12, 1979, congratulating him on his triumph over the Shah.<sup>43</sup> In the text of 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."<sup>44</sup>

In fact, Syria was the first Arab country to recognize the new regime in Iran.<sup>45</sup> Countries such as 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 quite cautiously.<sup>46</sup> Iraq's foreign minister, for example, in reaction to the news of the Shah's overthrow, only went so far as to say that "Iran's internal affairs concern the Iranian people only."<sup>47</sup> However, it was clear even during the winter of 1978-79 that the Iraqi Ba'th was extremely concerned about the opposition movement in Iran, which had assumed a religious character. Baghdad was wary of a Shi'ite revival and its potential repercussions on Iraq.<sup>48</sup> Even before the toppling of the Pahlavi throne, the Shah's close ally King Hussein of Jordan had gone on record by denouncing Khomeini as a heretic.<sup>49</sup>

During the initial weeks after the revolution, Hafez Assad's brother Rif'at sent envoys to Tehran to discuss possible avenues of cooperation between the two countries, particularly against Iraq.<sup>50</sup> 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 Shi'ite south.<sup>51</sup> Rif'at Assad, who served as commander of the Syrian Defense Brigades (Saraya al-Difa'), apparently was not in favor of the Syrian-Iraqi unity talks, fearing that they would eventually benefit his leading rival for succession to his brother, former air force and intelligence chief Na'ji Jamil, who enjoyed close ties

with the Iraqi Ba'th.<sup>52</sup>

In March, the first senior Syrian official, Information Minister Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad, visited Iran, where he met with Ayatollah Khomeini in Qom, and presented him with an illuminated Quran as a gift on behalf of Hafez Assad.<sup>53</sup> In addition to the fact that bilateral relations between the two states started 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 the case of Iran, relations with Arab states which had enjoyed close relations with the ancien regime (i.e. Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iraq) gradually deteriorated. Conversely, Arab governments and movements which had adopted a hostile stance towards the Shah began to seek favour with revolutionary Iran. Close ties were cultivated with the Polisario Front, Libya's Muammar Qadhafi and Shi'ite movements in both Iraq and Lebanon.<sup>54</sup> It also came as no surprise in early May when Ayatollah 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."<sup>55</sup>

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, the Syrians had initially pinned their hopes on the unification scheme with neighbouring Iraq. Indeed, some progress was made towards the implementation of the unity scheme in the winter of 1978-79. However, by April 1979, it had become clear that the leadership of the two rival wings of the Ba'th had quite disparate visions about what unification would entail. As progress in the negotiations became painfully slow and finally ground to a halt, Assad subsequently began to give careful consideration to the next viable option - an alliance with Iran in order to outflank Iraq, bolster Syria's position vis-à-vis the Gulf Arab sheikhdoms, and strengthen its hand among the Lebanese Shi'ites.

Following the referendum on the future form of government in Iran, Assad sent another message to Khomeini congratulating him on the fact that the Iranian people had finally achieved their aspirations. He also expressed confidence that bilateral relations between the two states would continue to grow and flourish, both on the official and the mass level.<sup>56</sup> The rapprochement between the two sides during 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 Shi'ite population 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 the 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 mount opposition against the regime, attacking oil installations and government facilities. The Iraqi Ba'th did its utmost to encourage the unrest in these regions in order to pin down Iranian security forces, thereby weakening the Iranian state and, in parallel, augmenting Iraqi power and influence in the Gulf region.

One should note that Iraq's strategy was not entirely an offensive campaign. In reality it was partially a defensive response, designed to neutralize and deter Iranian interference in Iraq's

domestic affairs by levelling the playing field. By June 1979, the propaganda war between the two states was also in full swing. The press and news media on both sides denounced each other. While Tehran tried to portray the Iraqi leadership as unbelievers belonging to a "Takriti clique," Baghdad's propaganda machine described the clerics as "turbaned shahs" who still held on to the traditional pre-revolutionary beliefs of Persian racial superiority and the need to expand Iran's "lebensraum" in the Gulf region at the expense of the Arabs.

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

"...Throughout thousands of years, Persia was liberated from the tyranny of emperors only twice. The first time 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 able to rid themselves of their tyrannical emperor, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, they were only able to do so through Islam - for whose advancement and spread among nations, including the Persian nation, primary credit should go to the Arabs."<sup>57</sup>

As early as June of that year, Tehran radio's Arabic service called on the Iraqi people to unite and topple the tyrannical regime which was oppressing them.<sup>58</sup> In addition to Tehran's "official" policy towards its Arab neighbors, various statements made by some prominent clerics who had no official capacity within the regime further tarnished Arab-Iranian relations. The most notable instance occurred at a press conference in Qom on June 15, when Ayatollah Sadeq Rouhani declared that Bahrain was an integral part of Iran. His statement provoked a strong reaction throughout the Arab world.<sup>59</sup> Baghdad and Cairo in particular sharply condemned it. By July, Iran's relations with Iraq and many of the other conservative Arab states had degenerated to such a degree that two distinguishable camps with conflicting positions on Iran had already crystallized in the Arab world. The battle lines of the Persian Gulf War had already 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 thereto.

#### **THE NEW ORIENTATION OF IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE SYRIAN RESPONSE**

Once in power, the new regime in Tehran followed up on the policies of Prime Minister Shahpour Bakhtiar's government (during the last 37 days of the imperial regime), which broke off diplomatic relations with Israel and South Africa, withdrew from the Central Treaty Organization (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 Palestine Liberation Organization as an expression of its solidarity with the Palestinian cause.<sup>60</sup> Iran not only became an enemy of Israel, but also identified with the position of the Steadfastness Front.<sup>61</sup>

In light of Iran's new political posture and Egypt's banishment from the Arab fold, Syrian officials argued that the loss of Egypt to Israel could be offset by forging an alliance with Persian Iran. From their viewpoint, nurturing an Arab-Iranian friendship would strengthen the Arab camp. Despite the absence of Egypt, a powerful new ally like non-Arab Iran would enhance the ability of the Arab states to undermine Israeli power in the region.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, they claimed that the loss of Iran had been one of the greatest setbacks suffered by the West and Israel since the rise of Nasser in Egypt almost a quarter of a century earlier. For the Arabs to merely sit back and not to exploit this new opening would be foolhardy.<sup>63</sup>

Besides the change in Tehran's foreign policy posture, the Iranian authorities took substantive measures to harmonize public opinion within the country with the state's new political orientation on the international level. In contrast to the Shah who had tried to propagate a chauvinistic ideology by glorifying Iran's pre-Islamic history and endeavoured to purify Persian culture by ridding it of outside influences (particularly Arab), the revolutionary regime attempted to downplay Iran's Persian heritage and instead emphasized her Islamic character. Systematic efforts were undertaken by the Iranian authorities to stress the commonality of interest, history and culture between Persians and Arabs within the framework of the Islamic ummah (community).<sup>64</sup> This particular trend, for example, was reflected in the increase of Arabic language instruction and Arab studies in the curriculum of schools and universities.<sup>65</sup> In addition, some Iranian officials stated that the Persian Gulf should be called neither "Persian" nor "Arabian," but instead should be referred to as the "Islamic" Gulf.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, Iranian Foreign Minister Karim Sanjabi made statements to the effect that the provisional government of Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan would reconsider the fate of the three Gulf islands (the Greater Tunb, the Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa) occupied by Iran since November 1971, and would possibly turn them over to the United Arab Emirates. Politically, Iran's new-found flexibility on issues pertaining to the Gulf and its security were part of an overall effort to warm up to the Gulf Arab states. From an ideological perspective, according to the Islamic universalist approach, it was argued that territorial disputes and names of bodies of water should not drive a wedge between Muslim peoples, regardless of their nationality.

Thus, the Syrians 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.<sup>67</sup> 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.<sup>68</sup> They realized that Iran's revolutionary ideology contained both internationalist and indigenous ideas which were incompatible; on the one hand an Islamic universalist ideology, and on the other, Iranian nationalism influenced by Ithna Ashari (Twelver) Shi'ism. Historically, these two contending factors presented a major dilemma to Iran's policymakers. Like other revolutions which occurred within a specific national and international context, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic could be interpreted as the product of a dialectic between Iran's strong affinity with the Arabs due to the Islamic faith versus Iranian nationalism, which differentiates her from her Arab neighbors.<sup>69</sup>

However, many Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq in particular, felt threatened by the vitriolic rhetoric emanating from Tehran, and consequently did not share

Syria's enthusiasm for the Iranian revolution. They did not see the revolution as a historic opportunity to end the Arab-Iranian rift, but rather as an event which could spark domestic unrest in the 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 the already existing antagonisms and introduced new stumbling blocks on the path towards a Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation. On almost every issue concerning Iran, whether it was the Shah, Khomeini, Shi'ite fundamentalism or Arab-Iranian relations, Damascus and Baghdad had conflicting views. While Iraqi-Iranian relations had steadily improved under the Shah between 1975 and 1979, Syrian-Iranian ties had deteriorated in the same time period. During the 1970's, Syria had provided safe haven to the Shah's opponents, while Iraq had expelled Khomeini upon the Shah's request in October 1978.<sup>70</sup> Assad welcomed the Shi'ite awakening in the Middle East after the Iranian Revolution, while Baghdad on the other hand feared that Iran would incite the restive Shi'ite population in southern Iraq to rebel against it.<sup>71</sup>

Overall, while Syria considered revolutionary Iran as a powerful new ally of the Arabs in the struggle against Israel, Iraq viewed her as a major threat to the security of the eastern flank of the Arab world and the sheikhdoms of the Gulf.<sup>72</sup> During 1979-1980, Syria and Iran drew closer to one another; Iraq on the other hand distanced herself from the two and assumed a more militant posture vis-à-vis Iran as tensions between the two states escalated.

#### **THE EMERGENCE OF THE SYRIAN-IRANIAN ENTENTE AND THE ROAD TO WAR (AUGUST 1979 -AUGUST 1980)**

A month after the collapse of the Syrian-Iraqi negotiations amid accusations of Syrian involvement in the alleged coup attempt, Syrian Foreign Minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam was dispatched to Iran as part of a major diplomatic initiative to expand relations between the two states. Khaddam held talks with Iranian Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi and Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan on increasing political and economic cooperation between the two countries.<sup>73</sup> He also met with Ayatollah Khomeini in Qom, where he declared that Iran's Islamic revolution was "the most important event in [our] contemporary history."<sup>74</sup> He proudly stated that Syria had assisted the forces which participated in the Iranian revolution "prior to its outbreak, during it and after its triumph."<sup>75</sup> In the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict and Egypt's defection from the Arab camp, he pointed out that the revolution was considered to be a positive "step in restoring the balance in the area against the Zionist enemy."<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, in subsequent meetings between Syrian Information Minister Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad and his Iranian counterpart, Dr. Minachi, it was agreed that the Syrian news agency (SANA) would set up an office in Tehran and, similarly, Iran's Pars news agency (later renamed IRNA) would open up an office in Damascus.<sup>77</sup>

Just as Syria had begun to make serious overtures towards Iran, the latter also responded positively to the Syrian initiative, in light of the rapid deterioration of Arab-Iranian relations in the Gulf region. Tehran gradually began to put greater emphasis on its friendship with Damascus. The

growing tensions in the Gulf were to a large extent an outgrowth of the escalating crisis between Iran and Bahrain.

### **The Deterioration of Iranian-Gulf Arab Ties and the Syrian Mediation Effort**

Although the appointment of an Iranian ambassador to Manama had allayed Bahraini concerns somewhat, the detention of a prominent Bahraini Shi'ite cleric, Muhammad Ali al-Akari, upon his return from a visit to Iran, sparked demonstrations and unrest. Iran responded by accusing Bahrain of persecuting its Shi'ites and demanded the immediate release of all political detainees. The escalating cycle of tensions continued with Iran (intentionally or inadvertently) conducting naval maneuvers in the Gulf, which Bahrain interpreted as muscle-flexing on Iran's part. By September, Saudi Arabia had dispatched two army brigades to the island at Manama's request. Ayatollah Rōuhani himself subsequently added more fuel to the fire by warning the Emir of Bahrain that, unless oppressive measures were discontinued against the people, Iran would encourage the people of Bahrain to demand unification with the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>78</sup>

Iran's behavior drew harsh criticism from different corners of the Arab world. In addition to sharp words from Bahrain and Kuwait, as a sign of things to come, the Iraqis and Egyptians were only too happy to denounce Iranian behavior and express their readiness to protect Arab interests in the Gulf region. In fact, Egyptian Vice-President Hosni Mubarak stated that Egypt was prepared, upon request, to provide military support to Bahrain or any other Arab state which was the victim of foreign aggression.<sup>79</sup> Iran in turn lashed out, accusing Baghdad and Cairo of blowing the matter out of proportion in order to justify their efforts to fill the vacuum left by the Shah as the new policeman in the Persian Gulf.

The ongoing debate and power struggle between pragmatic and radical elements within the Tehran government over whether to export the Islamic revolution or to pursue the goals of the revolution at home had a direct impact on the country's foreign relations. Iran's neighbors especially were disturbed rather than soothed by the mixed signals emanating from Tehran. Coupled with historical Arab-Persian and Sunni-Shi'ite prejudices, the stage was gradually being set for a full-scale war.<sup>80</sup> The Kuwaiti and Iraqi news media at the time accused Iran of using religion as a front to establish a new Persian Empire, and create schisms among the Sunni and Shi'ite Arabs in the area.<sup>81</sup>

Although Iran's image was becoming sullied in much of the Arab world, Syria and other members of the Steadfastness Front maintained their loyalty to the Iranian revolution. In September, Foreign Minister Yazdi stopped off in Damascus on his way back for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in Havana. In his meeting with Hafez Assad, he extended an invitation to the Syrian leader to visit Iran in the near future.<sup>82</sup> This was followed up by the visit of Iranian Deputy Prime Minister Dr. Sadeq Tabatabai in early October to discuss the rift between Iran and its Arab neighbors. After meeting with Assad and other senior officials, he explained at a press conference that revolutionary Iran's foreign policy was based on the principle of non-interference in the affairs of its Arab neighbors. However, Iran would not sit idly by in the event of a conflict between the Arabs and Israel.<sup>83</sup> With regard to Bahrain, he emphasized that neither Ayatollah Khomeini nor any Iranian

official had ever made any statements claiming Bahrain to be part of Iran. He went on to attack Egyptian President Anwar Sadat as a traitor to the Arab cause, who was attempting to fan the fires of hatred in the Gulf in order to re-enter the Arab fold in a circumspect manner. Tabatabai also held discussions with the Grand Mufti of Syria, who praised the Iranian revolution, stressed the need for Islamic unity and declared that there was no difference between Sunnis and Shi'ites.<sup>84</sup>

In order to defuse the situation in the Gulf, which Iraq and Egypt were using to their full advantage, a few days later, Tabatabai, accompanied by Syrian Foreign Minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam, flew to Manama to seek an audience with the Emir of Bahrain, Shaykh Isa Bin Salman Al-Khalifah. In Bahrain, they held a joint meeting with the Emir, the prime minister, the foreign minister and the heir apparent (who also held the post of defense minister).<sup>85</sup> Despite the joint Syrian-Iranian initiative to calm tensions, and subsequent Syrian claims that their mediation efforts had succeeded in bridging the differences between the Gulf Arabs and Iran, relations between the two sides continued to be uneasy.<sup>86</sup>

In the meantime, Iraqi-Iranian relations sank to new depths in the autumn of 1979. A cycle of mutual recriminations, continuous border clashes, incessant interference in the affairs of the other, and calls for the overthrow of the other regime, led to the closure of Iranian consulates in Basra and Karbala and the Iraqi consulates in Khorramshahr and Kermanshah.<sup>87</sup> However, the growing tensions with Iraq were temporarily eclipsed by a major confrontation with the United States, after the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran by Islamic militants on November 4, 1979.

### **Iran's Confrontation with the United States and Iraq, and Syria's Role**

In the immediate aftermath of the embassy take-over, Syria declared its support for the Iranian action, and called on the other Arab states to throw their weight behind Iran. The Syrians went so far as suggest that the Arab League take up the issue at its summit meeting in Tunis in late November. Foreign Minister Khaddam stated that "the Iranian revolution gave appreciable help to the Palestinian cause and it is normal that it should be backed by the Arabs."<sup>88</sup> Libya also demanded that the Arab League take up the issue of the Carter administration's freezing of Iranian assets in US banks and challenge it. However, the Arab League's foreign ministers rejected the Libyan request outright.<sup>89</sup> A flurry of diplomatic activity followed in the meantime. Iran's new foreign minister, Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, held extensive talks with Syrian ambassador Ibrahim Yunis on ways to broaden the scope of political and economic cooperation between the two countries, while an Iranian delegation was dispatched to Tunis to galvanize Arab support for Iran's case against the United States. The Iranian representatives subsequently held a series of meetings there with Syrian President Hafez Assad, Lebanese Prime Minister Selim Hoss, PLO Chairman Arafat, Libyan Foreign Secretary Jallud, and the Algerian delegation.<sup>90</sup> Once again only Syria and Libya were at the forefront, demonstrating their solidarity with Iran. On November 26, a joint Libyan-Iranian statement was issued in which the two sides confirmed the need for "Arab-Iranian fraternity" and its development and consolidation for the good of the Arab and Iranian nations. Moreover, the two parties reiterated their commitment to Islamic and Arab liberation movements in "their struggle against colonialism, imperialism and Zionism."<sup>91</sup> This was followed a few days later by an official



Syrian government statement emphasizing its support for the Iranian cause and expressing concern about the American naval build-up in the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea in response to the hostage crisis. Concomitantly, another Iranian delegation led by Dr. Mohammad Ali Hadi was dispatched to various foreign capitals to win Arab backing for Iran's position. The delegation's first stop was Damascus, where it held meetings with Assad and Khaddam.<sup>92</sup>

Two days before the arrival of the Iranian delegation in Damascus, Brigadier-General Mohammed al-Khouli, the Chief of Syrian Air Force Intelligence (also Director of Special Operations in the Middle East, and a close aide of Hafez Assad) arrived in the Iranian capital. While in Tehran he delivered a message from Khaddam and held extensive talks with Sadeq Ghotbzadeh.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, according to Western intelligence reports, during his visit the two sides entered into a secret agreement to conduct joint covert operations against Iraq in order to destabilize Saddam Hussein. Al-Khouli held discussions with several of Ayatollah Khomeini's advisers. Apparently, the main outcome of the meetings was closer collaboration between the Syrian and Iranian intelligence services to assist the activities of the Shi'ite opposition in southern Iraq. In the course of his meetings and deliberations, it was agreed that Ayatollah Montazeri's son would serve as the main liaison with Damascus on the anti-Iraq operations. Immediately after al-Khouli's visit, two Syrian intelligence teams were dispatched to Iran to establish a permanent base of operations.<sup>94</sup>

The harmonization of Syrian-Iranian policies in November and December coincided with the erosion of Iran's relations with its two most important Arab neighbors, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. In late November, when Saudi Shi'ites in the oil-rich Hasa province tried to hold ceremonies commemorating the holy day of Ashura, banned by the authorities, clashes occurred with security forces which led to a number of deaths. The incident sparked demonstrations and unrest throughout the province. Saudi authorities quickly rushed in twenty thousand troops to restore order. Although the Shi'ites had traditionally been a repressed minority in the Saudi kingdom, having been the victims of discrimination and poor treatment, and therefore having a legitimate grievance against Riyadh, the evidence suggests that Iranian clerics such as Ayatollahs Khalkhali and Rouhani were trying to encourage Shi'ite opposition against Riyadh as the Saudis charged.<sup>95</sup> Iran subsequently denounced the "barbaric repression" of the Shi'ite minority as clear proof of the tyrannical and ferocious nature of the Saudi regime.<sup>96</sup>

In the midst of continuous border clashes between Iran and Iraq, and repeated statements by senior officials on both sides calling for the removal from power of their rivals across the border, on November 1, Iraq's ambassador to Lebanon held an interview with the Lebanese daily *Al-Nahar* in which he bluntly stated that, as far as Iraq was concerned, relations with Iran could only improve if Tehran agreed to revise the 1975 Algiers Accord (relinquishing joint sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab), granted the Kurdish, Arab, and Baluchi minorities in Iran autonomy, and withdrew from the Tunb and Abu Musa islands in the Persian Gulf.<sup>97</sup> His comments prompted a swift response from Tehran, which accused Baghdad of serving the goals of Western imperialism by refusing to participate in the Steadfastness Front against Israel and the unity scheme with Syria.<sup>98</sup> Iran also moved in November to restore full diplomatic relations with another of its staunch Arab allies, Libya. The ties between the two had been severed nine months earlier due to Iranian suspicions that

Muammar Qadhafi had been responsible for the disappearance of the prominent Lebanese Shi'ite cleric, Ayatollah Musa Sadr.<sup>99</sup>

It is worth mentioning that, within a three-week period during the month of December, unidentified gunmen (in all probability Iraqi-backed) twice attacked Syrian diplomatic representations in Tehran. In the first instance, they attacked the Syrian consulate general, and in the second, they assaulted the Syrian ambassador's residence. In the latter incident at least one Iranian Revolutionary Guard assigned to the premises was shot.<sup>100</sup>

As 1980 commenced, further unrest in the Hasa province of Saudi Arabia, an intensive propaganda campaign orchestrated by Iran against the House of Saud, and the realization by both Baghdad and Riyadh that Iran's revolution posed a direct threat to their national security prompted both sides to coordinate their policies more closely. This in turn led to further attacks on both regimes in the Iranian news media, portraying the Saudi-Iraqi rapprochement as part of a grand strategy masterminded by the West to safeguard their interests in the Gulf region in the absence of the Shah.<sup>101</sup> Relations between Iraq and Saudi Arabia had grown more cordial since the Baghdad summit of November 1978. Moreover, the failure of the Syrian-Iraqi unity scheme in mid-1979 and Iran's provocative behavior in the area had given additional impetus to the reconciliation between Saddam Hussein and King Khaled.<sup>102</sup> As early as November 1979, there were reports that Saudi Arabia and Iraq had begun secret negotiations to create a collective security arrangement in the Gulf region. During the course of these talks, Riyadh seems to have given its approval for the stationing of Iraqi forces in Bahrain and Oman, to prevent any unrest instigated by Iran and serve as a springboard for military action against the latter.<sup>103</sup> Before the Iranian revolution, Iraq had been perceived to be the primary revisionist power in the area, bent on upsetting the existing status quo. With the toppling of the Pahlavi throne, and the emergence of a revolutionary regime in Tehran, the general view among the Arab sheikhdoms was that Saddam Hussein had now assumed the Shah's mantle as the guarantor of the status quo in the Gulf.<sup>104</sup> Tehran for its part did not shrink from any opportunity to denounce the Saudi royal family as puppets of the United States and the Iraqi Ba'ath as atheists who adhered to a godless ideology.

### **The Iraqi Propaganda War and Syria's Utility for the Islamic Republic**

The marked deterioration in Arab-Iranian relations was accompanied by a very gradual change in Iraqi propaganda against the Islamic Republic. While the Iraqis had previously concentrated on tarnishing the image of the clerical regime by portraying them as "turbaned shahs," by early 1980 subtle changes could be noticed in the statements of Iraqi officials. The leadership in Tehran was described as un-Islamic, and the rivalry between Iran and Iraq was presented as an extension of the age-old conflict between Persians and Arabs. Between January and September 1980, an unmistakable transformation occurred in Iraqi propaganda, attacking not only the Iranian regime, but also Persians as a whole. Therefore, on the ideological level, Iraqi propaganda made it imperative for Iran's ruling clerics to cultivate close ties with as many Arab states as possible, particularly those that would enable her to counter the Iraqi challenge and also facilitate Iranian participation in the Levant in the Arab-Muslim confrontation against Israel. Using the aforementioned criteria, and in

light of Tehran's warm relations with Damascus, Syria was the ideal candidate.<sup>105</sup>

In an interview with the Paris-based *Al-Watan al-Arabi*, in response to Iranian denunciations of the Iraqi Ba'hi as not only being reactionary, but also un-Islamic, Saddam Hussein stated that it would be erroneous for the Iranians to think that there was any sort of contradiction between any genuine Islamic revolution and an Arab revolution. He posited that "the mere supposition or expectation that such a conflict or contradiction is inevitable makes the Iranians the enemies of the Arab nation."<sup>106</sup> Just over a week later, on February 8, Saddam Hussein issued his Pan-Arab Declaration, in which he advocated close collaboration among the Arabs against foreign enemies and stressed the need for all Arab states to support an Arab country when it is engaged in war against a non-Arab entity.<sup>107</sup> By the spring, all indications seemed to be that Baghdad had come to the inevitable conclusion that war with Iran was the only viable option to neutralize the Iranian threat and assert its position in the region, especially in the Gulf and vis-à-vis Syria. The Iraqi leadership had by then become extremely sensitive to the attitude of other Arab countries towards the Iranian revolutionaries, interpreting any Arab sympathy for the clerical regime as betrayal of the greater Arab and Iraqi interests.<sup>108</sup> Syria on the other hand continued to cultivate strong ties with Tehran (in spite of the increasing disillusionment with its policies among the majority of its Arab neighbors). The Syrian position was articulated by senior officials such as Information Minister Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad, who stressed in an interview that "We appreciate the role of the Iranian revolution and we are establishing the closest possible relations with it in various fields...We believe that establishing good relations with the Iranian revolution and supporting that revolution so it can settle down and devote time to help the Arabs liberate their occupied territories is the duty of every Arab who believes that Israel and US imperialism are the danger to be faced."<sup>109</sup> Even in light of Iran's increasing isolation due to the continuation of the hostage crisis and the imposition of economic sanctions, the Syrians seemed adamant in preserving their ties with Iran and, if the opportunity arose, to help resolve the dispute with the United States.<sup>110</sup>

By mid-March, Iraqi-Iranian relations had sunk to new depths, as both countries were forced to reduce their embassy staffs upon the request of the host government and their ambassadors were declared *persona non grata*. Consequently, relations were reduced to the *chargé d'affaires* level.<sup>111</sup> Baghdad blamed Iran for an attempt on the Iraqi foreign minister's life on April 1, and from then onwards Iraqi statements assumed a distinctly racist tone. For example, in a speech about the incident, Saddam Hussein for the first time drew parallels between the hostilities with Iran and the battle of Qadisiyah between the Persian Sassanid and Arab armies 1,400 years ago.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, a subsequent political commentary described Khomeini as having a distorted understanding of Islam and utilizing it against the Arabs to achieve "racist, decadent, and Shu'ubi" objectives. It went on to accuse him of wanting to dominate the Arabs and avenge a 1,400-year-old Persian inferiority complex. It continued to say that Khomeini wanted to "kill all that is neither Persian or Islamic in his devious fashion...is a racist lunatic. Were Khomeini's regime in a position to begin [this] war, it would not hesitate to do [so], despite its consequences...They are sick with their Persianism."<sup>113</sup> The intensification of the propaganda war coincided with an outright statement of solidarity with Iraq by Jordan's King Hussein, and a visit by the Jordanian Chief of Staff to Baghdad

to assess the military situation.<sup>114</sup>

These events were concurrent to a meeting between Khomeini and Syria's ambassador to Iran, Ibrahim Yunis, who conveyed a message of support for Iran from Hafez Assad. Khomeini for his part asked for Syrian cooperation with Iran in its struggle against imperialist and anti-Islamic forces, such as the United States and Iraq.<sup>115</sup> The escalating tensions between Iran and Iraq manifested themselves in different ways throughout the region. In Lebanon, armed clashes began to occur periodically between the Shi'ite Amal militia and the pro-Iraqi Arab Liberation Front and elements of the Lebanese Ba'th Party sympathetic to Iraq (for further details on Syrian-Iranian cooperation in Lebanon see the next chapter).<sup>116</sup>

In the aftermath of the failed attempt to rescue the American hostages, which resulted in the death of eight US servicemen, the Syrian government was quick to condemn the action as "an act of piracy aimed against Iran and its people."<sup>117</sup> Following the debacle in the Iranian desert, the Syrian regime received Iranian Foreign Minister Sadeq Ghotbzadeh, on the first leg of an Arab tour to win support for Iran. Ghotbzadeh met with Hafez Assad, Abd al-Halim Khaddam and Rifat Assad. He briefed them on the details of the US rescue attempt and other regional developments. During his meeting with the Syrian leader, the latter reiterated his support for Iran's stance against Washington and Tel Aviv.<sup>118</sup> According to diplomatic sources, another topic that was high on the agenda was the growing tension between Iran and Iraq and the need for further Syrian assistance.<sup>119</sup> Following two days of talks, a joint communiqué was issued condemning the American operation as a clear violation of the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of Iran, which posed a threat to international peace and security.<sup>120</sup> In a subsequent press conference, on May 1, Khaddam criticized the American onslaught on Iran, emphasizing that any effort directed against the Iranians would be considered to be against the Arabs also. He accused Washington of trying to impose its will on the Arab world.<sup>121</sup>

By the middle of the spring, Syria had commenced a major airlift of Soviet-made arms to Iran. The purpose of these shipments was to replace Iran's stocks of Western-supplied arms, which were rapidly becoming depleted, and also to assist Iran in military operations on the frontier with Iraq. Syrian Antonov An-12 cargo planes ferried the arms, which were taken from Syria's own stockpiles, to Iranian airfields. The weapons included 23-mm anti-tank guns, mortars, artillery pieces, anti-tank missiles, anti-aircraft missiles and ammunition. Damascus had apparently agreed to provide military assistance during a secret visit by a personal representative of Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr in April. The emissary had submitted to Assad a detailed list of weapons, ammunition, spare parts and medical equipment which Iran urgently needed to counter a possible Iraqi attack.<sup>122</sup> In addition to the arms airlift, Syrian military personnel were sent to Iran to train and familiarize Iranian troops with the military equipment.<sup>123</sup>

### **Syria's Quest for Regional Allies and Inter-Arab Politics**

Besides the mutual enmity with Iraq, Syria also had its own reasons for cultivating close ties with Iran. Syria's relations with Saudi Arabia and Morocco markedly deteriorated in mid-1980. The recognition of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (RASD) at the Tripoli meeting of the

Steadfastness and Confrontation States greatly disappointed the Saudi and Moroccan monarchs. The Saudis were also alarmed by the growing friendship between Iran and Syria which, in light of the poor state of Iranian-Gulf Arab relations, enabled Syria to play its "Gulf card" in the arena of inter-Arab politics. Damascus on the other hand was livid about Saudi Crown Prince Fahd's statements on Riyadh's willingness to undertake efforts to bring about a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict within the framework of UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, thereby in effect undermining the PLO and Syrian positions.<sup>124</sup>

The motives behind Syrian policy at the time were both defensive and offensive. With Egypt out of the picture in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the possibility of an alliance with Iraq ever more remote, and Saudi and Iraqi ambivalence on the Camp David Accords, Assad had decided to bolster his position in the Levant and the Gulf by allying himself with Khomeini's Iran. From his perspective, a Syrian-Iranian axis in the region would strengthen his hand, thereby providing him with the necessary leverage to deal with Baghdad, Riyadh and Tel Aviv from a position of strength.<sup>125</sup>

Another bone of contention between the Syrians and the Saudis was the Tripoli conference's recognition of South Yemen as a confrontation state. Much to the Saudis' chagrin, the Syrians subsequently went as far as saying that any attack on South Yemen would be interpreted as an act of betrayal against the Palestinian cause. In this case, Assad's main intention was to highlight the importance of friendship between Aden and Moscow in order to irritate the Saudis and Iraqis. Riyadh for its part disapproved of Syrian efforts to push the Soviets center stage as the Arabs' loyal patron. Furthermore, it viewed the prospects of an emergent Syrian-Iranian-South Yemeni entente with deep consternation. By August, several operating axes had appeared in the Middle East, a Saudi-Iraqi-Jordanian axis, a Syrian-Iranian-Palestinian axis, a Syrian-Soviet-South Yemeni axis and an Omani-Egyptian-American axis.<sup>126</sup>

After the expulsion of the Syrian ambassador and his staff from Baghdad on August 18, and Damascus' retaliation in kind three days later, Syrian-Iraqi relations reached a nadir.<sup>127</sup> Surprisingly, the marked deterioration provided Syria with another opportunity to diversify its relations and seek a new ally when Muammar Qadhafi sent a message to Saddam Hussein and Hafez Assad pleading for a reconciliation between the two Ba'thi regimes and unity in the Arab world.<sup>128</sup> In early September, Damascus responded to the Libyan call in a positive manner by proposing a union between Syria and Libya instead. This eventually resulted in an official state visit by Assad to Libya, where the two leaders held extensive talks which culminated in the Declaration of Unity. According to the declaration, the two states would take simultaneous steps towards the formation of a single political entity ruled by a single executive body and revolutionary command.<sup>129</sup>

Qadhafi's decision to call for a union between the two states was motivated primarily by political considerations, while in Assad's calculations the merger was intended to bring certain economic benefits. The Libyan leader desired to legitimize finally his dubious claim that his country was a confrontation state. Since the signing of the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt, he had consistently argued that nothing stood between Israel and Libya. Syrian-Libyan unity seemed to be an effective method to lend some credibility to his position. From Assad's viewpoint, the alliance meant that he would be able to secure Libyan petrodollars to finance his arms build-up to

check Israeli power. Qadhafi, after all, had promised after Camp David to foot the bill for \$1 billion in Soviet-made arms for the Steadfastness Front. Moreover, the union with Libya should translate into a reliable source of oil for Syria, which no longer considered it prudent to rely on Iraq and Saudi Arabia, due to the poor state of relations with those two countries. Both parties also believed that a union between them would strengthen their bargaining position with Moscow, thereby enabling them to convince the Soviets to upgrade their military assistance to the new state.<sup>130</sup>

Following the Declaration of Unity, the Iranian government expressed its support for the alliance and its willingness to cooperate with this new united front against Israel and the supporters of Camp David.<sup>131</sup> On September 11, Iranian Prime Minister Masood Raja'i sent messages to Assad and Qadhafi conveying his pleasure at their moves towards unity, and hoping that they would support the Iranian revolution and other progressive movements against foes such as "the bloodthirsty Iraqi Ba'thi regime."<sup>132</sup> Baghdad on the other hand ridiculed the Syrian-Libyan unity attempt, stating that it would inevitably fail, since the two parties were not sincere in their unionist intentions. The Iraqi media also denounced Damascus and Tehran as enemies of Arabism and criticized them for their support of the Amal militia in Lebanon.<sup>133</sup>

Iraq for its part was also engaged in intensive diplomatic maneuvering and consultations with its prospective allies during this period, as it prepared to go to war with Iran. During the summer of 1980, Iraqi Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz held secret negotiations in Jordan and Saudi Arabia with US officials and informed them of Baghdad's preparations to invade Iran in the autumn. In view of the abysmal state of US-Iranian relations at the time, the US expressed no objections to the Iraqi plan.<sup>134</sup> Subsequently, in early August, Saddam Hussein flew to Taif, where he conferred with the Saudi monarch and informed him of his decision to invade Iran.<sup>135</sup> The following month, the Iraqi leader received the Bahraini Prime Minister, Shaykh Khalifah bin Salman Al-Khalifah, and later on, the Qatari foreign minister. Both expressed their support for Iraq's policies in the Gulf and condemned Iran's behavior. Finally, on September 17, Saddam Hussein convened an extraordinary session of the Iraqi National Assembly, where he announced the abrogation of the 1975 Algiers Accord with Iran, thus setting the stage for the invasion of Iran five days later.<sup>136</sup>

## **SYRIA AND THE PERSIAN GULF WAR**

A few days before the Iraqi invasion, Iranian President Bani-Sadr dispatched a special envoy to Damascus to seek diplomatic and military assistance. Bani-Sadr, who had come to the conclusion that a full-scale conflict with Iraq was imminent, asked for public statements supporting Iran's position, additional arms, and for Syria to hold manoeuvres on the Iraqi border to divert Iraqi forces from the eastern front. After prolonged talks and consultations, the Syrian leader refused to make any public statements explicitly supporting Iran or to conduct military exercises in the east, for fear of the political repercussions it would have on the regime, both domestically and regionally. However, Assad agreed to resume arms shipments to Iran as soon as possible. Within a few days after the war erupted, the Syrians began to airlift weapons, medical supplies and teams of ordnance experts and physicians to Iran. The arms shipments consisted primarily of Sam-7 ground-to-air missiles, Sagger anti-tank missiles and RPG-7 anti-tank rockets.<sup>137</sup>

Immediately after the hostilities began, most Arab leaders declared their support for Iraq, most notably King Khaled of Saudi Arabia who stated that his country stood "with Iraq in its pan-Arab battle and its conflict with the Persians, the enemies of the Arab nation."<sup>138</sup> In Amman, an emergency meeting of the Council of Ministers was convened by King Hussein, who subsequently released a statement urging a unified Arab stand in support of "fraternal Iraq." Only Libya's Muammar Qadhafi and PLO chairman sent messages to both Baghdad and Tehran expressing regret and pleading for an end to the war, since it only served US and Israeli interests.<sup>139</sup> Although Syria remained silent, Assad had telephone conversations with the Saudi and Jordanian monarchs on the 25 of September, hoping to find a way to stop the hostilities as soon as possible. He subsequently sent Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara to Taif to confer with King Khaled. However, all indications seem to point to the fact that the mission was in vain.<sup>140</sup>

Despite significant Arab support for Iraq, Baghdad had committed three major mistakes when it decided to initiate a full-scale war. It not only miscalculated its own military capability and the resilience of its revolutionary foe, but also failed to secure its western flank by mending fences with Damascus before setting out to deal with Iran. Assad's hopes for a ceasefire and a quick end to the fighting had been dashed; however, the spectre of a triumphant Iraq prompted him to take drastic measures to help avert an Iraqi victory and ensure Iran's ability to fight on. The Syrian regime feared that, if Iraq decisively defeated Iran, it would come under direct threat from Baghdad. Furthermore, a victorious and confident Iraq would be in a favourable position to openly assist the Syrian Muslim Brethren and challenge Syrian interests in the region.<sup>141</sup>

While the war did not produce any new alignments, it did serve as a catalyst to crystallize the already emerging rival camps, thus polarizing the Arab world even further. The most important axes in the early phase of the conflict were the Syrian-Iranian-Libyan axis and the Saudi-Iraqi-Jordanian axis. In the case of the former, Syria proved to be Iran's most valuable ally, while Jordan played an extremely critical role in aiding the Iraqi war effort. Amman, for example, allowed Iraqi military aircraft to be stationed in Jordanian airbases out of harm's way. The Mafraq airbase in eastern Jordan was in effect handed over to the Iraqis.<sup>142</sup> Jordan also put its Aqaba port facilities at the disposal of the Iraqis and mobilized a fleet of trucks and transport vehicles to take the cargo to Iraq.<sup>143</sup> Furthermore, in early October a 40,000-strong Jordanian force was reportedly moved to the Jordanian-Iraqi border, ready to intervene in the Gulf war if the need arose.<sup>144</sup>

Syria for its part remained silent about the war during the first two weeks, anxiously waiting to see if Iran would survive the Iraqi onslaught. However, by the first week of October, once it became clear that Iran had absorbed the initial blow and was rolling with the punches, Damascus finally broke its silence and condemned the Iraqi invasion, calling it "the wrong war against the wrong enemy at the wrong time."<sup>145</sup> Baghdad's attempts to portray the conflict as an Arab-Persian war and a defense of the Arab homeland against the "fire-worshipping racist Persians" were severely criticized.<sup>146</sup> Assad himself in a speech made a thinly veiled attack on Saddam Hussein's "hollow heroics" and highlighted the fact that Syria had the "capacity to inflict fierce punishment" on impostors.<sup>147</sup> Damascus claimed that fighting Iran would cause divisions in Arab ranks and divert their attention needlessly at a time when they should concentrate their energies against the true

enemy, Israel.<sup>148</sup>

According to an article that appeared in the Syrian daily *Al-Baʿth* on October 5, "fighting the Iranian revolution would only make Iran join the camp against the Arabs." It went on to say "we want Iran to join the Arab ranks which are hostile to imperialism and Zionism, we want Arab Iraq to remain an additional strength for Arabs against imperialism and Zionism, and not against the Iranian revolution."<sup>149</sup> It clearly stated that the war was neither in the interest of Iran nor Iraq and the Arab nation.

Iraq in the meantime continued its intensive propaganda barrage against Syria, accusing the latter of betraying the pan-Arab cause by sending troops and weapons to Iran. Despite Iraqi claims that Syrian and Libyan soldiers were captured in the fighting, no convincing evidence was ever produced.<sup>150</sup> Baghdad's campaign to discredit its neighbour prompted Syrian Assistant Foreign Minister Nasir Qaddur to summon the Iraqi chargé d'affaires in Damascus on October 6 to lodge a formal protest against the Iraqi accusations.<sup>151</sup>

Two days later, Assad flew to Moscow to conclude a Friendship and Cooperation Treaty with the Soviet Union. The signing of the agreement with Moscow reflected his strategy to bolster his position in the region (particularly vis-à-vis Israel and Iraq) by securing Soviet military and economic assistance and bringing his superpower patron in on the side of Iran.<sup>152</sup> Upon concluding the treaty, Assad and Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev issued a joint communiqué indirectly rebuking Iraq by supporting "Iran's inalienable right to determine its destiny independently and without any foreign interference."<sup>153</sup> During their negotiations, arrangements were made to have Soviet arms delivered to Iran. The Kremlin also gave its approval for the shipment of Soviet-made arms from Syria, Libya and other countries to Iran. Subsequently, Iranian military transport planes began continuous flights to Syria and Libya, carrying Soviet-made weapons back to Iran.<sup>154</sup> Iranian air force Boeing 707's, 727's, 747's and Lockheed C-130's flew to Damascus and Tripoli, carrying arms and ammunition back to Iran. Furthermore, some of the C-130's brought Iranian casualties to Damascus airport to be treated in Syrian hospitals.<sup>155</sup> The Syrians played a critical role in maintaining the flow of arms from various Arab states to the Islamic Republic. Soviet-made equipment from Libya was shipped by sea to Syrian ports, where it was then transhipped by land via Turkey.<sup>156</sup> Algeria also commenced arms transfers to Iran in May 1981, after having decided to aid the Iranian war effort. These weapons were first sent by ship to the Syrian port of Tartus, where the cargo was unloaded and subsequently flown to Iran.<sup>157</sup>

Besides providing war material, the Syrians became a valuable source of intelligence on Iraq's capabilities and intentions. The Syrian ambassador to Tehran, Ibrahim Yunis, assiduously relayed any useful intelligence to Iranian officials, and was also used as a conduit of information by Moscow.<sup>158</sup> In order to improve coordination of the joint Syrian-Iranian effort to stem the Iraqi onslaught, General Ali Aslan, the Syrian Deputy Chief of Staff and Head of Operations, travelled to Iran to confer with his Iranian counterparts. He discussed the military situation with the Joint Chief of Staff, General Valiollah Fallahi, and General Javad Fakuri, the Defence Minister and Air Force Commander. As part of their overall effort to aid Iran, the Syrians agreed to try to procure American-made spare parts in Europe for Iran's western-equipped arsenal.<sup>159</sup>



The war very quickly brought the rifts in the Arab world into sharper focus and deepened the already existing cleavages. Relations between members of the pro-Iraqi camp and Iran's other valuable Arab ally, Libya, dramatically deteriorated in 1980. Muammar Qadhafi was quick to criticize Riyadh's decision to permit a US military presence (specifically AWACS early-warning aircraft) in the Kingdom, and to side with Iraq in the war. In a telegram addressed to King Khaled, he stressed that it was "an Islamic duty for [them] to be allied with the Muslims in Iran in this confrontation in order to face the crusade instead of fighting them in place of America."<sup>160</sup> On October 11, Baghdad severed its diplomatic ties with Damascus and Tripoli, accusing them of having erected an air bridge to Tehran, supplying the "Magi racist clique" with arms to continue their aggression against Iraq. The Iraqi foreign ministry declared the Syrian and Libyan embassy staff persona non grata, giving them 48 hours to leave Iraq. A statement released by the foreign ministry stated that the rulers of the two countries were devoid of any Arabism.<sup>161</sup>

Interestingly, both Syria and Libya denied providing military assistance to Iran even after the Iraqi announcement. There is no doubt that Assad and Qadhafi were well aware and sensitive about the public mood, both within their countries and in the Arab world, with respect to the Gulf war. In their riposte, the Syrians accused Saddam Hussein of serving US interests by launching the war, characterizing it as Saddam's "crazy and condemned war against revolutionary Iran and against its principled stand with the Arabs."<sup>162</sup> Qadhafi's sermons for the "liberation" of Mecca from American occupation prompted Riyadh to break off diplomatic relations with Tripoli in late October. The Saudis warned Qadhafi to stay out of their internal affairs and (instead of supporting Iran) to remain neutral or side with Iraq in the war.<sup>163</sup> The intense inter-Arab squabbling in October clearly demonstrated that the Arab world was more divided than ever. The eruption of the Gulf War alone was not cause enough for two mutually hostile camps to emerge but, with the plethora of other politically divisive issues that were confronting the Arabs, the conflict caused even the most ardent pan-Arabists to rid themselves of any illusion of existing Arab unity.

While Jordan and Saudi Arabia threw their weight behind Iraq, Iran with the assistance of Syria tried to secure as many regional allies as possible. In late October, Prime Minister Raja'i visited Algeria and Libya on his way back from a trip to the United Nations in New York. On October 30, Ayatollah Montazeri, Khomeini's designated successor, met with the Syrian, Libyan and Algerian diplomatic heads of mission in Qom, where he expressed "gratitude for the Islamic and revolutionary stance adopted by [these] fraternal states and their support of Iran's Islamic revolution."<sup>164</sup>

Despite Amman's and Riyadh's efforts to assist Baghdad on the diplomatic, economic and military front, the Saudi-Iraqi-Jordanian axis proved inadequate to meet all of Iraq's military needs and requirements. Baghdad eventually had to succumb and compromise its pan-Arab stand by dispatching a military delegation to Cairo to secure spare parts and ammunition for its Soviet-made arsenal, which was rapidly becoming depleted.<sup>165</sup> The marked deterioration of Iranian-Gulf Arab relations following the Islamic revolution and the outbreak of the First Gulf War had finally provided the Egyptians with a back door not only to gradually improve Iraqi-Egyptian relations but, more importantly, to re-enter the Arab political arena.

Similarly, the Syrian-Libyan-Iranian axis failed to meet many of Tehran's expectations as far

as military assistance was concerned. While the Syrian armed forces possessed a Soviet-made arsenal, the Iranian military establishment which the clerical regime had inherited from the Shah was mainly equipped with American-made arms. Secondly, there were limits to the amount of military hardware with which Syria could provide its Persian ally, since its own security situation necessitated the deployment of troops along the Golan Heights against Israel, in Lebanon and within Syria itself, at a time when the Muslim Brethren were escalating their campaign of terror against the Ba'thi regime in Damascus. Thirdly, the deployment of troops along the Syrian-Iraqi border to ease Iraqi military pressure on revolutionary Iran was bound to evoke a harsh response from many Arab capitals.<sup>166</sup> Therefore, Iran was also forced to compromise its political stance by approaching Israel for spare parts and equipment to maintain its Western-equipped armed forces. However, while Tel Aviv may have made temporary inroads by re-establishing contacts and influence in Tehran, Egyptian collaboration in the Iraqi war effort was to have a far greater and lasting impact on inter-Arab politics.

Despite certain limitations in Syria's ability to assist Iran militarily, it played an instrumental role in preventing the formation of a united Arab front against Iran in November 1980, by provoking a major diplomatic crisis and military confrontation with Jordan in the period leading up to the Arab summit meeting which had been scheduled to begin in Amman on November 25.

#### **The Syrian-Jordanian Confrontation and the Amman Summit**

By the autumn of 1980, Syrian-Jordanian relations had reached a nadir due to differences on a whole range of critical political issues. The Syrian Ba'thi regime was fighting for survival against an unrelenting campaign orchestrated by the Muslim Brethren with the aid of Iraq and Jordan.<sup>167</sup> In addition, with a new American administration scheduled to take office in two months, Jordan's King Hussein intended to resuscitate the Middle East peace process by positioning himself in a politically advantageous position in order to convince Washington to include the Hashemite kingdom in a new peace initiative.<sup>168</sup> The Syrians on the other hand, who were still infuriated by Sadat's defection, were intent on preventing such a development, which would further sideline them and weaken their position. Iraq's invasion of Iran also drove a wedge between the two states, as Jordan very quickly became Saddam Hussein's staunchest supporter in the conflict while Syria lent valuable assistance to Iran, albeit in a discreet manner whenever possible.

With the domestic confrontation with the Brethren coming to a head, and Jordan's intention to use the Arab summit scheduled to begin in Amman on November 25 to rally support for its position in the Gulf war and the Middle East peace process, Damascus set out to thwart the Jordanian monarch's efforts, utilizing any possible means on every possible front. Shortly after the beginning of the Gulf War, Hafez Assad authorized the Chief of Syrian Military Intelligence, General Ali Duba, and the Head of Air Force Intelligence, General Mohammed Al-Khouli, to intensify their campaign to subvert the Iraqi regime, and also start targeting Jordanian officials in retaliation for their support for the Syrian Brethren.<sup>169</sup> Furthermore, in mid-November, the Syrians sponsored the formation of a united front of Iraqi opposition groups committed to the overthrow of the rival Ba'thi regime in Baghdad. The grouping, named the National Democratic and Patriotic Front in Iraq (AI-

Jabhah Al-Wataniyah Al-Qawmiyah Al-Dimuqratiyah Fi Al-Iraq) consisted of dissident Iraqi Ba'thists, the Iraqi Communist Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Arab Socialist Movement, the People's Liberation Army Organization and the Democratic Independent Movement.<sup>170</sup> The Front's charter reflected the diverse goals of its members, such as improved relations with the Soviet Union and Iran, autonomy for Iraqi Kurdistan, democratic reforms in Iraq and active participation in the struggle against Israel.<sup>171</sup>

Two weeks before the Amman summit, Damascus made known its reluctance to attend the meeting when Foreign Minister Khaddam urged the Secretary-General of the Arab League, Chedli Klibi, to postpone the conference. Khaddam warned that at a time of many "disputes and deep divisions" among the Arabs the holding of a summit meeting would be futile, since it would only underscore the "failure and fragmentation" of the Arab nation.<sup>172</sup> Iran also demonstrated its displeasure with Jordan's stance and conduct in the Gulf war when the secretary and spokesman of the Supreme Defense Council announced that Tehran had decided to reduce its diplomatic relations with Jordan from the ambassadorial level to the chargé d'affaires level.<sup>173</sup> Two days later, on November 17, Syria and Iran's other ally, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, embarked on a tour of several Arab countries to persuade them to support Syria's position on the postponement of the Amman summit.<sup>174</sup>

Concomitantly, Iraq's other Arab ally, Saudi Arabia, reacted swiftly in order to prevent the political gulf among the Arabs from widening even more by dispatching its foreign minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal, to Damascus. Upon his arrival he held talks with Assad and Khaddam, trying to convince them to drop their request for the postponement of the summit meeting.<sup>175</sup> However, the Saudi foreign minister was not successful in swaying the Syrian leadership, which subsequently exacerbated the situation even more by accusing Jordan of mistreating Syrian citizens at border crossings between the two states. Tensions were further heightened by a series of incidents in which a member of the Syrian Muslim Brethren was assassinated in Amman, and by the apprehension and execution of the two killers by Jordanian authorities.<sup>176</sup>

Foreign Minister Khaddam nonetheless travelled to Amman on November 18, to participate in a plenary meeting of Arab foreign ministers and to set the agenda for the summit meeting. However, the discussions degenerated into a verbal confrontation when the issue of postponing the summit was put forth. The meeting apparently came to an abrupt end amid confusion and sharp exchanges between Syrian and Iraqi representatives. Khaddam, adamant that inter-Arab differences should be resolved during the foreign ministers' meetings before the commencement of the actual summit, warned "if this summit takes place over our objections, it may be the last summit held by the Arab League."<sup>177</sup> He explained that "unless the present Arab situation were treated seriously, it was difficult to imagine the summit achieving anything and its convocation might be a catastrophe."<sup>178</sup> He later added: "we want to purify the Arab atmosphere and to achieve a concerted Arab situation, capable of confronting the challenges threatening the Arab nation from Zionism and imperialism... There can be no talk of our participation in the summit before the purification of the Arab atmosphere."<sup>179</sup>

Syrian officials then held a joint strategy session in Damascus with representatives from

Algeria, Libya, South Yemen and the PLO, and journeyed to Amman to persuade other Arab foreign ministers to postpone the conference. The Syrians announced that they wanted comprehensive talks on all inter-Islamic disputes, such as the Gulf war and their differences with Iraq, before the summit convened. If their demands were not met, they would boycott the conference. Subsequently, the PLO stated its intention to follow suit if other members of the Steadfastness Front also refused to participate.<sup>180</sup> Damascus requested that a smaller-scale summit be held in an Arab capital other than Amman. The Syrian request evolved from the fact that there were serious differences of opinion among the Arab foreign ministers over the exact agenda of the conference. King Hussein's primary purpose was to win a general Arab endorsement for Iraq's war effort. Assad on the other hand was determined to restrict the agenda to inter-Arab economic cooperation and the conflict with Israel.<sup>181</sup>

In the meantime, as tensions mounted between Syria and Jordan, Iran also undertook a serious initiative to lobby members of the Steadfastness Front to back the Syrian position. In conjunction with the Syrian effort, the Speaker of Parliament, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, travelled to Algeria and Libya, where he held discussions with government officials. On November 23, two days before the summit, he flew to Damascus for talks with Syrian leaders.<sup>182</sup> The next day Libya, Algeria, South Yemen, Lebanon and the PLO announced their intention to boycott the Amman summit. Their decision dealt a serious blow to the prestige and plans of King Hussein. Furthermore, Syria had clearly succeeded in its attempt to demonstrate that it possessed veto power over Arab League deliberations.<sup>183</sup> The PLO's decision to stay away from the conference further undermined the Iraqi-Saudi-Jordanian gambit to create a pan-Arab front not only against Iran, but also against Israel. The absence of Syria, Lebanon and the PLO, three of Israel's major adversaries, and other members of the Steadfastness Front underscored King Hussein's failure to push forth his agenda, and the fact that the Arabs were in the midst of one of their most serious political crises in over a decade.<sup>184</sup> In the words of one observer, "the withdrawal of the Syrians and their allies reduced the Amman summit conference to little more than a rump session." Syrian Information Minister Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad boasted that without Syria and the PLO the conference was meaningless.<sup>185</sup> King Hussein had hoped to derive benefits for his solid backing of Iraq, which he perceived as the emerging dominant power in the Middle East.<sup>186</sup> Although Jordan's goal of drawing up a joint Arab strategy against the "Zionist entity and the Persian enemy" had been gravely compromised, thereby forcing the participants to concentrate on a joint Arab economic development policy, Assad did not stop there.<sup>187</sup>

Early on, Assad had decided to avoid the Arab summit for fear of being castigated by the majority of the participants as "un-Arab" for siding with Persian Iran, and "un-Islamic" for defending the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (a price he had to pay for consolidating his friendship with Moscow). Moreover, he refused to sit at the same table with two of the Syrian Muslim Brethren's major supporters, King Hussein and Saddam Hussein.<sup>188</sup> Five days prior to the beginning of the summit, Assad ordered the deployment of the 1st Syrian Armored Division near the town of Dar'a, 5 kilometers from the border with Jordan. As the summit approached more armoured units were gradually dispatched to the area. By the second day of the summit, some 20,000 troops and 400

tanks had been deployed.<sup>189</sup> Once the build-up was confirmed, the Jordanians quickly reacted by moving the 12th Mechanized Division, stationed in the northwestern region bordering Syria and Israel, eastward to counter the Syrian concentration. As a precaution, the 5th Armored Division based northeast of Amman was moved 16 kilometers north to the border to cover the 12th's right flank. Once both sides had completed their deployments, some 24,000 Hashemite troops were facing more than 30,000 Syrians.<sup>190</sup> In order to intimidate the Jordanians further, Syrian warplanes crossed into Jordanian airspace and overflew the Mafraq airbase in the northeastern part of the country.<sup>191</sup>

Referring to the looming crisis, King Hussein declared during the summit that, if necessary, his country would utilize all possible means to defend "every last inch of its territory" against Syrian aggression.<sup>192</sup> On the last day of the summit, in his concluding address at the conference, King Hussein rebuked Assad for his actions by stating that "...an Arab must not support a non-Arab in a dispute with another Arab brother. It is a shame indeed that Iraq, which is fighting to regain both Arab rights and its own rights and sovereignty over its territory and waters on the eastern flank of the Arab homeland, is stabbed in the back by an Arab hand."<sup>193</sup> He went on to warn that "we must all stand against this, for it establishes a new and dangerous trend for the first time among the Arab states. This can bring us damaging consequences."<sup>194</sup> Damascus immediately lashed out by denouncing the Jordanian monarch's comment, and threatened to attack Syrian Muslim Brethren camps which it alleged had been set up inside Jordan.<sup>195</sup>

The imminent threat of hostilities between Jordan and Syria was enough to prompt Riyadh to send Prince Abdullah, the Kingdom's Deputy Prime Minister and Commander of the National Guard, as a mediator to defuse the crisis on November 30. After several rounds of talks in Damascus and Amman, in early December, Prince Abdullah announced that the Syrians had agreed to commence a gradual withdrawal of forces, which was completed by the middle of the month.<sup>196</sup> Amman also ceased its sabre-rattling and dispersed its troops. Although the Saudis claimed credit for ending the showdown, it is extremely doubtful that Assad ever wanted to go to war. In all fairness, however, Saudi efforts did facilitate the easing of tensions and made it easier for both parties to climb down the ladder of escalation in a face-saving manner.<sup>197</sup>

### **The Impact of the Persian Gulf War on Syrian-Iranian Relations**

The Syrian-Jordanian confrontation was a poignant example of Assad's willingness to take extreme measures - almost going to the brink of war to derail the diplomatic efforts of Iraq's staunchest Arab ally. Syria's instrumental role in convincing six key Arab players to stay away from Amman and military intimidation of the host were undoubtedly appreciated by Tehran. The failure of the Arab participants to take decisive steps to resolve inter-Arab feuds exacerbated or produced by the Gulf War was greeted with a sigh of relief from the Iranians. On all levels, political, military and ideological, Syria's moves and the outcome of the summit represented a major gain for the Damascus-Tehran axis. Moreover, the outcome of the events demonstrated to an unprecedented degree that non-Arab actors now could play a role in the arena of inter-Arab politics. By the end of 1980, the Syrian-Iranian-Libyan axis had become as much a part of the Middle Eastern and Arab

political landscape as the Saudi-Iraqi-Jordanian camp confronting it.<sup>198</sup>

The continuation of the hostilities between Iran and Iraq consolidated certain trends in Arab-Iranian relations and introduced new ones. Fear of Iran's brand of Islamic fundamentalism and a sense of Arab solidarity prompted Jordan, Egypt and the Gulf Arab states to throw their weight behind Iraq.<sup>199</sup> Conversely, the war facilitated the transformation of the Syrian-Iranian rapprochement into a formal alliance.

At a time when many of her Arab neighbors were overtly siding with Iraq and the situation at the warfront was anything but favorable, Iran clearly valued her friendship with Syria. Besides Damascus' vital role in brokering the Iranian military resupply effort, Tehran considered it a necessity to cultivate a close friendship with the Syrian Arab Republic in order to prevent the formation of a hostile Arab union against Iran. Iranian policymakers feared the possibility of regional isolation. They furthermore realized that strong ties with Syria would add a whole new dimension to Iran's foreign policy, enabling her to play a more active role in inter-Arab affairs.<sup>200</sup>

Indeed, the maintenance and expansion of cordial relations with as many Arab states as possible was of utmost importance, in order to depolarize the situation and dispel any notion that the Gulf War was an extension of the historical Arab-Persian conflict.<sup>201</sup> This particular objective was also of great ideological significance to Iran's religious leaders, who firmly believed that an alliance with Syria would lend some credibility to their claim that revolutionary Iran was at the forefront of all progressive and anti-imperialist movements internationally, regardless of their national or religious character.<sup>202</sup>

In the aftermath of the Amman summit crisis, Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Raja'i, in an official statement, expressed his gratitude for Syria's unwavering support of the Iranian revolution and described bilateral relations between the two states in very favourable terms. It is interesting to note that on the subject of the Syrian Muslim Brethren's aims and activities, he condemned them as "a gang which masqueraded under the guise of religion and was supported by the Jordanian and Iraqi regimes."<sup>203</sup>

A series of events in the early months of 1981 drove Damascus and Tehran even closer together and made the strengthening of bilateral relations a primary goal of both Syrian and Iranian diplomacy. In the midst of a brief hiatus in the Syrian-Jordanian confrontation (December 1980 to January 1981), Assad travelled to Tripoli to explore avenues for closer collaboration with Qadhafi. However, by early February the Syrians came to the bitter realization that their hopes for a union with Libya had been dashed. Qadhafi, having buttressed his position through substantial Soviet arms deliveries and recent military gains in Chad, demanded the dissolution of the Syrian Ba'th Party and its replacement with Libyan-style popular committees.<sup>204</sup> For the leadership in Damascus, with the memory of the dissolution of the Syrian Ba'th and the painful experience of union with Nasserite Egypt still in their minds, this was one pill that they refused to swallow for the sake of so-called "unity." Thus, relations between Tripoli and Damascus cooled to some degree.

Concomitantly, a second crisis erupted in Syrian-Jordanian relations when twenty armed men belonging to a Syrian-backed Palestinian group called the Eagles of the Revolution Organization succeeded in abducting the Jordanian chargé d'affaires in Beirut, Hisham Moheisen,

after a thirty-minute gun battle with security forces, which resulted in the deaths of at least two Jordanian embassy guards and the wounding of three others, including Lebanese gendarmes.<sup>205</sup> Amman was quick to accuse Assad's brother Rif'at and Syrian military intelligence of the kidnapping. This incident had been preceded five days earlier by the arrest in Jordan of a team of Syrian agents who were planning to assassinate Prime Minister Mudar Badran. Amman made the plot public only after the incident in Beirut and once again implicated Rif'at Assad.<sup>206</sup> By the end of the month the propaganda war between the two sides was in full swing, with the Syrian press even calling for the overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy.<sup>207</sup>

Iran's relations with several Arab countries also took a turn for the worse during this period. In January, Tehran finally severed its diplomatic ties with Amman and Rabat because of their pro-Iraqi stance in the Gulf war and at the Islamic summit in Taif.<sup>208</sup> Saudi-Iranian relations also deteriorated the following month when Iran accused Riyadh and Kuwait of collusion with Baghdad by agreeing to boost their oil production to 1.8 million b/d in the run up to the invasion of Iran to aid the Iraqi war effort. Moreover, there were reliable reports that Saudi ports had been used to ship some 100 Soviet-made T-54/55 tanks to Iraq.<sup>209</sup> Subsequently, Iraqi First Deputy Prime Minister Taha Yasin Ramadan flew to Saudi Arabia to discuss the Gulf war and Saudi-Iraqi ties with King Khaled. During his visit, Riyadh publicly reiterated its support for the Iraqi position.<sup>210</sup> In late February, an Iranian delegation headed by Jalaleddin Farsi arrived in Damascus and held talks with its Syrian counterparts.<sup>211</sup>

The growing sense of regional isolation and the imperative to forge closer bilateral links was driven home in Tehran and Damascus, and compounded in early April, after revelations about the extent of Iraqi-Egyptian military cooperation in the Gulf war. After months of repeated denials by Egyptian officials, President Anwar Sadat admitted that an initial agreement worth \$100 million had been reached in December between the two parties. Under the terms stipulated in the agreement, some 4 thousand tons of ammunition, spare parts, missiles and rockets were delivered to Iraq, while another 8 thousand ton shipment was being prepared to be sent eventually via Jordan.<sup>212</sup>

### **The Raid on Al-Walid**

Probably the most notable instance of Syrian-Iranian cooperation against the Iraqi war effort in the early stages of the conflict occurred in the spring of 1981. On April 4, eight Iranian F-4 Phantom fighter-bombers took off from Nojheh (formerly Shahrokhi) airbase near Hamadan. The aircraft carried full payloads of bombs. Their mission was to attack the Iraqi military and petroleum complex at Al-Walid (also known as H-3), which consisted of four installations.<sup>213</sup> This was the first such raid against Al-Walid, which had not been the target of any Iranian air attacks so far, unlike all other Iraqi airbases. The base was in the westernmost region of Iraq, situated only 50 kilometres east of the Iraqi-Jordanian border (just west of the town of Al-Rutbah).<sup>214</sup> Up until then, the base had been effectively out-of-range for Iranian aircraft. The main significance of Al-Walid at the time, which made it a high priority target, was that it was the home base for the bulk of the Iraqi strategic bomber force (Tupolev TU-16 Badgers, TU-22 Blinders) and transport aircraft (Ilushyin Il-76's, Antonov An-12's).<sup>215</sup> During the initial phase of the war, the Iranian air force had succeeded in achieving air

superiority by launching an intensive air campaign against Iraqi airbases and flying air superiority missions. Unable to make effective use of its bombers, and fearing their destruction at bases in eastern Iraq, the Iraqi High Command had moved them to Al-Walid out of harm's way, to be utilized later at an opportune moment.

In order for the Iranian warplanes to reach Al-Walid, during the planning of the operation, the Syrians agreed to allow them to fly through Syrian airspace, where they would be refuelled in the air on both legs of the mission by Iranian air force Boeing 707 and 747 tankers. The Iranian Phantoms flew at low altitude over Iraqi airspace near the Turkish border, attempting to evade Iraqi radar, crossing then into Syria and proceeding southwest towards the Iraqi panhandle, where they re-entered Iraqi airspace flying at low levels to escape detection. The attack succeeded in catching the Al-Walid defenses off-guard.<sup>216</sup> During the course of the attack some forty-six Iraqi aircraft were destroyed on the ground.<sup>217</sup> After discharging their payloads they returned to Iran by flying the same route back. Apparently, one of the Phantoms was damaged by Iraqi anti-aircraft fire during the raid. It was forced to make an emergency landing at a Syrian airbase near Dayr al-Zawr, where the two-man crew was taken back to Damascus, and from there back to Tehran.<sup>218</sup>

The raid on Al-Walid was significant in several respects. Militarily, in a single stroke, Iran was able to annihilate most of Iraq's strategic bombers without incurring any losses. Furthermore, the loss of the aircraft meant that in one operation approximately 15-20% of the Iraqi air force had been destroyed. Politically, the attack demonstrated the lengths to which the Syrians were willing to go to assist the Iranian war effort against Iraq, without directly involving their own military personnel in an attack on a fellow Arab country. The operation would not have been feasible without Syrian collaboration. The raid on Al-Walid was a one time shot, since the Iraqis quickly learned from their mistakes and took the necessary precautions to guarantee that they would never again incur losses on such a magnitude. However, both militarily and politically the raid was extremely important and an impressive feat, one which has been often ignored or downplayed in Arab and Western circles, because of the authoritarian nature and unpopularity of the Syrian Ba'thi and Iranian clerical regimes.

### **Stalemate, Power Struggle in Tehran, and Regional Developments**

By the spring of 1981, despite some sporadic fighting and occasional incidents such as the Al-Walid raid, the situation at the warfront had reached an impasse. The Iraqis were unable to make any further advances and were now trying to consolidate their gains from the initial offensives in late 1980. Iran had attempted an ill-conceived offensive in January to push the Iraqi forces back, but the operation turned out to be a disaster because of the political bickering between Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr and the radical clerics of the Islamic Republican Party (IRP), as well as Iraqi military preparedness.<sup>219</sup> During the spring and summer the political power struggle between the two factions intensified, halting military operations at the front and curtailing important diplomatic initiatives while the future course of Iran's revolution was being fought out in Tehran among the leadership.<sup>220</sup>

Irrespective of the political power struggle, the continuation of the war led to extensive cooperation among members of the pro-Iraqi bloc in the Arab world, and further Iranian efforts to



preserve close relations with its Arab allies, particularly Syria and Libya. In April, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait announced that they had agreed to lend Iraq \$6 billion for the reconstruction of war-ravaged areas. This seems to have been part of a larger \$14 billion aid package put together by the Gulf Arab states.<sup>221</sup> The pro-Iraqi bloc continued to be very critical of Iran and its main Arab allies, Syria and Libya.

In the aftermath of the Al-Walid raid, numerous reports were circulated in the Arab and Western media about a secret agreement between Syria and Iran on the conduct of the air war against Iraq. According to the reports, during a secret visit by the Iranian defense minister to Damascus, an understanding was reached to put Syrian airfields at the disposal of Iranian warplanes to conduct raids into Iraq, and for Syrian MiG-23 aircraft to provide close air support for Iranian planes on bombing missions.<sup>222</sup> Overall, these reports seemed somewhat suspect. The evidence indicates that Syrian airbases were used by Iranian warplanes on some occasions, although it is highly improbable that Syrian warplanes provided support for the Iranian air force sorties inside Iraqi airspace, since in the event that a Syrian plane had been shot down, it would have had enormous repercussions for the Assad regime at home and in the Arab world. Furthermore, with the exception of Al-Walid, most of Iraq's airfields were located in the eastern part of the country along the Tigris-Euphrates valley, much closer to the Iranian border. It would make very little sense for Iranian warplanes to take a longer route from Syria without escaping detection to raid Iraqi military installations in the east. The only plausible case would be for Iranian warplanes to use airbases in northeastern Syria, near the adjoining Turkish-Iraqi border, to attack Iraqi strongholds in Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>223</sup>

Syria's continued support for Iran, and incessant Arab criticism of its stance and conduct in the Gulf War at a time when the Syrian Muslim Brethren were intensifying their campaign within the country, meant that Iranian officials occasionally, albeit somewhat reluctantly, also had to take a stand on the unrest in Syria by making public statements expressing their "wholehearted solidarity" with Hafez Assad. The Iranian state-controlled media in general refrained from providing any coverage of the events in Syria.<sup>224</sup> In late April the leader of the Islamic Republican Party, Jalaleddin Farsi, told a SANA correspondent that the IRP could not condone the actions of the Syrian Brethren against the Syrian Ba'this at a time when Assad was trying to confront imperialist agents in the region such as Israel, Egypt and Jordan. Farsi praised Syria's ardent support of the Iranian revolution against the Iraqi aggression.<sup>225</sup>

Despite the mutual animosity of both Tehran and Damascus towards Baghdad, this did not prevent them - at least officially - from paying lip-service and condemning the Israeli raid on the Iraqi nuclear reactor site at Osirak on June 8, 1981. In a public statement, Iranian President Bani-Sadr posited that "the uncompromising opposition to the Iraqi regime and the brave and intense battle with the aggressor does not stop the Muslim nation of Iran from seriously condemning the airstrike by Israel."<sup>226</sup> Concomitantly, the Syrian Foreign Ministry issued a statement declaring that "the Syrian Arab Republic was not taken by surprise by the criminal operation suffused with treachery and rancor which was carried out by the Israeli air force against the Iraqi center for generating nuclear energy for peaceful purposes."<sup>227</sup> However, Iran's relations with most of its Arab neighbors remained tense.

The situation was further exacerbated by Iranian air attacks into Kuwaiti territory in mid-June, which the Iraqi media were quick to depict as part of the "Zionist-Persian" conspiracy, in light of the Osiraq raid and the appearance of various press reports about Israeli arms shipments to Iran, and their public denunciation by Iraqi and Jordanian officials throughout this period.

Furthermore, in mid-June a heavy earthquake struck the town of Golbaf in the Kerman region, resulting in serious loss of life and extensive damage. Syria, along with Algeria, responded by sending food and medical supplies for the victims. Assad also sent a message of sympathy to Ayatollah Khomeini.<sup>228</sup> Once the political power struggle in Tehran came to an end with the ouster of President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, and the election of Mohammad Ali Raja'i as the country's new president in early August, Assad congratulated him wholeheartedly, expressing his conviction that the ties between the two states would be strengthened "in the interest of the two peoples' struggle against imperialism and Zionism."<sup>229</sup>

### **Iran's Autumn Offensives and Syria's Assistance**

With the outcome of the power struggle in Iran now determined, the new leadership set out to expel the Iraqis from occupied territories and expand cooperation with Syria. Regular contacts between Syrian and Iranian officials were resumed to coordinate their activities on political and military matters.<sup>230</sup>

A series of events in the inter-Arab arena and the Gulf War in the autumn of 1981 gave further impetus to the need for increased contacts and collaboration between Tehran and Damascus. The unprecedented involvement of Persian Iran in inter-Arab politics was highlighted in September by its presence at the Steadfastness Front conference in Benghazi as an observer and guest of Qadhafi's Libya.<sup>231</sup> At the same time, as the war dragged on, the pro-Iranian camp appeared to be gradually coming apart. Apart from the outspoken support of Syria and Libya, Algeria was more low-key about its position, while South Yemen and the PLO distanced themselves from their earlier position.<sup>232</sup> These noticeable shifts made it imperative for the Islamic Republic to maintain cordial ties with its two most valuable Arab partners, Syria and Libya (the former in particular), at a time when it finally seemed that a continuation of the hostilities would be to Iran's advantage.

In late September, the Iranians achieved their first major battlefield success when elements of the 92nd and 16th Armored Divisions managed to push the Iraqis back across the Karun River, thereby breaking the siege of Abadan.<sup>233</sup> The breakthrough at Abadan could be partially attributed to the assistance of the Syrians, who provided five French-built Aerospatiale CT-20 airdrones. This significantly enhanced Iran's reconnaissance capability with photography of the disposition of Iraqi forces in the Abadan area prior to the commencement of the operation.<sup>234</sup> Some members of the pro-Iraqi camp, notably Saudi Arabia, went so far as to credit the lifting of the siege mainly to Syrian and Libyan military assistance.<sup>235</sup> According to the available sources, this would seem to be an exaggeration of the extent of their involvement and importance in the battle for Abadan.

Tehran's newly regained confidence was also reflected in the bombing of Kuwaiti oil installations. Despite Iranian denials, this action was clearly aimed at intimidating Kuwait (viewed as the weak link among Iraq's Gulf Arab allies, who were bankrolling the Iraqi war machine). Kuwait

reacted by recalling its ambassador to Tehran.<sup>236</sup> The Iranian action was condemned by Baghdad, Amman, Cairo, San'a and Abu Dhabi as a further indication of the clerical regime's anti-Arab disposition. The Saudis also denounced the Soviet-Iranian rapprochement that had been evolving for sometime with Assad's blessing.<sup>237</sup> The pro-Iraqi camp again turned up the pressure on Syria by carrying stories in their media about Iranian warplanes being stationed in Syria in order "to stab Arab Iraq in the back."<sup>238</sup> Recurrent accusations made in the Arab media and by Iraqi officials (for example Information Minister Latif Nassif Jassim) aroused the sensitivities of Syria, which responded by calling for an Arab military commission of inquiry to investigate the Iraqi charges.<sup>239</sup>

With respect to the Arab-Israeli dispute, Tehran and Damascus both greeted the news of Anwar Sadat's assassination with great enthusiasm.<sup>240</sup> Moreover, they strongly deplored Saudi Prince Fahd's eight-point peace plan, which Hafez Assad made sure did not get off the ground during the Arab summit at Fez in November.<sup>241</sup> Syria's successful drive to frustrate Arab initiatives undertaken by members of the pro-Iraqi camp were greatly appreciated by the ruling clerics in Tehran. Saudi-Iranian relations plunged to new depths at this juncture due to Iran's denunciation of the continued presence of US AWACS aircraft on Saudi territory, the Fahd initiative and Riyadh's staunch support for Saddam Hussein.<sup>242</sup> These points of contention inevitably led to a dramatic escalation in the war of words between the two sides. Tensions finally reached new heights in December with the uncovering of an Iranian-sponsored coup attempt intended to unseat the ruling Al-Khalifah family of Bahrain. Manama immediately expelled the Iranian chargé d'affaires. The North Yemenis followed suit as a gesture of support.

In response to the menacing threat from across the Gulf, Riyadh took a series of decisive measures to protect the Gulf Arab states and strengthen ties with members of the pro-Iraqi bloc in an effort to isolate and deter Iran. After the initial news about the coup attempt broke, the Saudi Minister of the Interior, Prince Nayif Bin Abdul Aziz, declared that "the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia considers the security of Bahrain and the Gulf countries the security of the Kingdom."<sup>243</sup> The Saudis followed through on their words by signing a bilateral agreement on internal security cooperation with Bahrain on December 20. Similar agreements were concluded with Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the weeks that followed. Upon sealing the agreement with Bahrain, the Saudi interior minister berated the Iranians severely by stating that "after their revolution, they [the Iranians] did not want to be the policeman of the Gulf, they have become the terrorists of the Gulf."<sup>244</sup> He added that "Our stand must be an Arab stand in support of Iraq; at the same time we must work to bring about an end to the war."<sup>245</sup> The Gulf Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, subsequently embarked on an all-out effort to buttress the Iraqi position. Within a week of the Saudi-Bahraini security accord, Riyadh signed an agreement with Baghdad resolving a sixty-year-old border dispute. The agreement settled differences over their 500-mile (800 kilometre) common frontier.<sup>246</sup> Kuwait also announced a \$2 billion loan to Iraq, bringing the total Gulf Arab contribution to Iraq to at least \$16 billion by the end of 1981.<sup>247</sup>

Iraq itself, having suffered a number of recent setbacks, tried to take full advantage of these events. In late November, the Iranians had launched Operation Tariq al-Quds, the prime objective being the recovery of the key border town of Bostan. The operation turned out to be a success;

however, allegations of Iranian atrocities committed against Iraqi prisoners in the aftermath of the battle were played up by Baghdad to enrage Arab opinion.<sup>248</sup> Increasingly, Iran's most ardent supporter, Syria, found itself in a very difficult position, struggling to defend its stance in the conflict.

Throughout the latter half of 1981, both Syria and Libya continued to provide Iran with military assistance of various kinds. In the summer, the first group of Iranian tank crews returned home after being trained to operate Soviet-made tanks in the Libyan desert. Shortly after their return, a shipment of 190 Soviet-manufactured T-54's, T-55's and T-62's arrived in Bandar Abbas from Libya.<sup>249</sup> By December, some 250 Iranian tankmen had received training in Libya, and 300 Soviet-made tanks had been shipped to Iran.<sup>250</sup> Libya and Syria continued to airlift East Bloc weaponry to Iran. The Syrians especially played a vital role in the transshipment of weapons to Iran throughout the year.<sup>251</sup> In Lebanon, the Syrian and Iranian intelligence services collaborated closely to weaken Iraqi power and influence as much as possible. As part of their overall strategy, a number of pro-Iraqi Ba'thists and Iraqi diplomats were assassinated. However, the coup de grace came on December 16, when the Iraqi embassy in Beirut was totally demolished by a car bomb which killed 30 embassy employees including the Iraqi ambassador.<sup>252</sup>

The defection of Arab states to the pro-Iraqi camp, the continued struggle against the Muslim Brethren and the looming crisis with Israel led Assad to the conclusion by the end of the year that serious efforts should be made to defuse the situation in the Gulf and to ask for Arab support against Israel. He therefore took it upon himself to visit the Gulf sheikhdoms in late December to request their assistance.<sup>253</sup> During his visit, Gulf Arab leaders made their assistance conditional upon Syria's abandonment of her pro-Iranian stance in the conflict.<sup>254</sup> Following the completion of his visit to the Gulf states, the Syrian and Kuwaiti governments announced a joint initiative to end the Gulf war.<sup>255</sup> Damascus radio announced that the opportune moment had arrived for terminating the hostilities between Iraq and Iran "in the interest of conserving Arab and Islamic energies to counter Israel's expansionist designs."<sup>256</sup> During his meetings with Saudi officials, Assad also gave his approval to Prince Fahd's plan to resolve existing differences between Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, Fahd was given the green light to mediate between Syria and Jordan.<sup>257</sup>

In the midst of these developments and diplomatic posturing by various Arab states, Tehran responded to the flurry of events by dispatching Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati to Damascus on December 30, to hold talks with Assad and Khaddam. Once the negotiations were concluded, it became quite apparent that the Iranians had rejected any attempt to intercede between the two combatants. They had decided to rebuff the Syrian-Kuwaiti initiative and determine the outcome of the war on the battlefield.<sup>258</sup> By the beginning of the new year, Tehran undoubtedly believed that the scale had tipped in its favor. Between December 12th and 16th, Iran had launched its third consecutive offensive in a three-month period, this time near Qasr Shirin. The operation codenamed Matla al-Fajr had resulted in the recovery of 100 square miles of Iranian territory.<sup>259</sup> At a press conference held on January 1, after his deliberations with the Syrian leadership, Velayati explained: "...the fate of the Iraqi-imposed war on Iran will be determined by the corps and combatants of Islam on the battlefronts." He denied that the issue of mediation between Iran and Iraq was ever raised at his meetings in Damascus. Velayati enumerated Iran's conditions for the

cessation of hostilities; (i) unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Iranian territory, (ii) determination of the aggressor by a competent and impartial international body, and (iii) payment of war reparations by the aggressor to the victim of the aggression.<sup>260</sup> As a gesture of solidarity in response to Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights, Iran offered to send Revolutionary Guards to fight against Israel.<sup>261</sup>

Despite the failure of the Syrian-Kuwaiti initiative, Assad's moves in the Gulf had not been completely in vain. He managed to ease tensions with Riyadh after the debacle at the Fez summit where he had obstructed any meaningful progress on Fahd's peace proposal. In addition, Assad was able to mend relations between Saudi Arabia and Libya, leading to the resumption of diplomatic ties between the two states on December 31.<sup>262</sup>

### **Iraq's "Pan-Arab Struggle" and Iran's Growing Regional Isolation**

The Islamic Republic's outright rejection of the Syrian-Kuwaiti offer did not adversely affect its relations with Ba'thi Syria. Iran could ill-afford to drive away its most valuable Arab partner at a time when it was clearly alienating many of its Arab neighbors and former allies. On January 12 Khaled al-Hassan, a member of the PLO's Central Committee, criticized the Iranian attempt to subvert the regime in Bahrain, characterizing it as "irresponsible" behaviour and underscoring the poor state of Palestinian-Iranian relations.<sup>263</sup> On the same day, the North Yemenis expelled the Iranian chargé d'affaires in San'a, accusing him of involvement in subversive activities.<sup>264</sup> Earlier in the month, Iraq and South Yemen agreed to upgrade their diplomatic ties to the ambassadorial level.<sup>265</sup> Iraq in the meantime also aggressively lobbied in Arab circles for the severance of diplomatic relations between Iran and all Arab states. It attempted to portray the Gulf war as a pan-Arab effort against "Persian expansionism."<sup>266</sup> In order to facilitate the Iraqi effort, King Hussein of Jordan announced that the Jordanian Arab Yarmuk Forces would accept volunteers to fight against Iran.<sup>267</sup> The response was overwhelming: hundreds of young Jordanians filed into recruiting stations to enlist in the Yarmuk Forces.<sup>268</sup> Syria and Libya were quick to denounce the Jordanian move. *Al-Ba'th* condemned the establishment of the force to wage war on Iran, pointing out Jordan's neglect of the threat emanating from Israel.<sup>269</sup> Damascus described King Hussein's decision "a worthless political stunt designed to distract attention from the Arab-Israeli conflict...trying to provoke Syria and inventing a marginal battle useful only to the enemies of the Arab nation."<sup>270</sup> Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi also adopted a similar line, declaring: "we thought that the call for volunteers by King Hussein would be aimed at liberating Palestine and Holy Jerusalem which is a stone's throw from King Hussein's residence, and not for the purpose of fighting against Iran."<sup>271</sup>

Iran reacted to the Jordanian action swiftly by announcing the formation of a battalion of Iraqi volunteers and former POW's to be sent to fight against the Israelis. The unit would be called the Golan Battalion.<sup>272</sup> The Iranian foreign ministry issued a statement highly critical of the Jordanian decision, characterizing it as "a direct and clear" proclamation of war against Iran.<sup>273</sup> With the intensification of the anti-Iranian camp's efforts to describe the war as an Arab-Persian conflict, and to wean away pro-Iranian Arab states, Iran explored various options to convince the Arabs that the war was not about conflicting nationalisms but disparate ideologies with different visions of a "just

Middle Eastern Order." In order to underscore the importance of the Palestinian cause in Iran, and to discredit the propaganda of the pro-Iraqi bloc, Iranian President Hojjatolislam Ali Khamene'i took the additional step of promising direct Iranian military intervention in the Arab-Israeli conflict once the war with Iraq had ended. In a message to Hafez Assad, the Iranian leader claimed on behalf of the Iranian people that the occupation of Jerusalem and the Golan was "as an occupation of our lands."<sup>274</sup> Concurrently, Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati toured Libya, Algeria and the Western Sahara to reaffirm Iran's friendship and desire for future cooperation with its North African Arab allies.

As Iraq's allies, especially Jordan, tried to arouse Arab patriotic and nascent anti-Persian sentiment, Iran's partners heightened their efforts to discredit them as tools of Zionism and Western imperialism in the region.<sup>275</sup> Baghdad itself used every available opportunity to demonstrate that Arab states were backing the Iraqi war effort and showing solidarity. In late February, the North Yemeni President, Colonel Ali Abdullah Salih, made a state visit to Iraq. The Iraqi media gave the maximum possible coverage to this event, which included the inspection of a battalion of North Yemeni volunteers at a training camp by the two heads of state. During the tour of the camp, President Salih stated: "the danger of intransigence would have never been stopped in the Arab homeland and the Islamic land had it not been for the steadfastness of Iraq, Iraq's army and its leadership."<sup>276</sup>

The ever widening rift in Arab ranks came into sharper focus in this period. Iran's and Iraq's Arab allies took drastic measures to ensure that the combatants they supported would be able to prosecute the war at a time when it seemed that the tide of the war was finally turning in Iran's favor. A case in point was the Kuwaiti parliament's decision to cancel its financial contribution towards the maintenance of the Syrian Arab Deterrent Force in Lebanon. The Kuwaitis angrily lashed out at the Assad regime, accusing it of pursuing its own agenda in Lebanon, carrying out repressive policies at home and betraying the Arab cause by backing Iran in the Gulf war.<sup>277</sup>

Hafez Assad, having just survived a major political confrontation with the Syrian Muslim Brethren which culminated in the crushing of the fundamentalist opposition in the city of Hama, now set out to deal a devastating blow to the Arab backers of the Brethren and assist the Iranians by cementing his budding alliance with Tehran. The Iranian military at this point in time was also planning a series of offensives in the early spring aimed at the recovery of the territories occupied by the Iraqi army.

#### **THE FORMALIZATION OF THE SYRIAN-IRANIAN AXIS AND IRAN'S SPRING OFFENSIVES**

Both sides stepped up their diplomatic efforts to seal the emergent Syrian-Iranian alliance. This process culminated in the visit of a high-ranking 48-man Syrian delegation headed by Abd al-Halim Khaddam (then the deputy prime minister and foreign minister) to Tehran in March 1982.<sup>278</sup> The two sides signed a number of important agreements, among them a trade protocol and an oil agreement.<sup>279</sup> According to the terms of the latter, Iran would export nine million tons of oil to Syria annually. In return, Syria would provide 300-400 thousand tons of phosphates (required for Iran's petrochemical industry) for a period of one year. Afterwards, Syria would increase her annual

phosphate exports to one million tons, an amount equivalent to Iran's domestic needs.<sup>280</sup>

At the time, Iranian officials stated that approximately 2.7 million tons of Iran's oil exports to Syria would be on a barter exchange basis, and the remaining 6.3 million tons would be paid for in cash.<sup>281</sup> However, one year later, Western sources revealed that Syria was importing 100,000 b/d of Iranian oil at the low rate of \$28 per barrel, an additional 10,000 b/d in a barter deal, and 20,000 b/d for free. This was at a time when the official OPEC price was still \$34 per barrel.<sup>282</sup>

During his visit to Tehran, Khaddam reportedly also signed a secret arms deal with his Iranian counterpart. Reports indicated that in early April several shiploads of heavy war material, including 130mm howitzers, ZSU-23 anti-aircraft guns, tank engines and ammunition left the ports of Tartus and Latakia bound for Iran. Furthermore, several planeloads of weapons also arrived in Iran from Syria. These deliveries coincided with a series of successful Iranian offensives in the spring of 1982, which resulted in the expulsion of Iraqi forces from much of the Iranian territory they had occupied.<sup>283</sup>

The bilateral agreements signed in Tehran formalized the Syrian-Iranian axis. The conclusion of the agreements and the setbacks suffered by the Iraqi army on the battlefield encouraged Damascus to intensify its efforts to assist the Islamic Republic. With the tide of the war turning and the possibility of the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime on the horizon, Syria resorted to various means to put pressure on Iraq.

Less than a week after the conclusion of these agreements, on March 22, the Iranian armed forces launched Operation Fatah al-Mobin (Clear Victory), aimed at driving back the Iraqis in Khuzestan province. The operation lasted only 8 days, but the results were so astounding that they even exceeded the best expectations of the Iranian High Command. By March 29, some 850 square miles of territory had been liberated, resulting in the destruction of three Iraqi divisions.<sup>284</sup> The Iraqi defeat sounded alarm bells throughout the region. One day after the end of Fatah al-Mobin, King Hussein arrived in Baghdad with his Chief of Staff to confer with Saddam Hussein. There was a great deal of speculation at the time that Amman might commit its own regular forces in the Gulf conflict.<sup>285</sup> Although this never materialized, the magnitude of the Iraq's reverses was significant enough to warrant decisive action on the part of her allies. On the day of King Hussein's arrival in Baghdad, King Khaled telephoned Saddam Hussein to discuss the events at the battlefield.<sup>286</sup> The gravity of the situation prompted the Saudi monarch to send his defense minister, Prince Sultan, to Baghdad for consultations with the Iraqi leader.<sup>287</sup>

On April 8, Syria closed her borders with Iraq.<sup>288</sup> Two days later, Syria shut down the trans-Syrian (IPC) pipeline to Tripoli and Banias, after having stored 1.5 million barrels of Iraqi oil.<sup>289</sup> The closure of the pipeline had major economic repercussions and compounded Iraq's predicament, at a time when the country faced mounting problems. The Syrian action reduced Iraqi oil exports by half to a mere 600 thousand b/d, which translated into \$17 million in lost revenues daily (approximately \$6 billion annually).<sup>290</sup> Iraq's only remaining oil export route was the Kirkuk-Dortyol pipeline (which possessed a capacity of 600 thousand b/d).<sup>291</sup>

The shutdown of the trans-Syrian pipeline heightened Baghdad's sense of insecurity. Iraqi officials very quickly came to the realization that they were still vulnerable to Syrian economic

warfare. In order to diminish their dependence on the Syrian pipeline, steps were taken to expand the Dortyol pipeline to one million b/d. Plans were also drawn up to have alternate pipelines constructed, linking Iraqi oil facilities with the Saudi port of Yanbu and the Jordanian port of Aqaba.<sup>292</sup>

During April 1982, Syrian military units were deployed along the border with Iraq, while Syrian military aircraft periodically violated Iraqi airspace.<sup>293</sup> Syria's military activity along Iraq's western frontiers was part of an overall strategy to exert pressure on Ba'thi Iraq and aggravate her sense of insecurity. The spectre of Syrian military intervention forced Iraq to dispatch some military forces to her western borders.<sup>294</sup> The Syrian military deployment was of substantial benefit to Iran in several ways. On the military level, troops which could have been used to resist the Iranian offensives during this period were now tied down along the Syrian-Iraqi frontier. Furthermore, Syrian pressure had a profound psychological impact on the Iraqis, who feared the possibility of a two-front war and economic strangulation.

Iraqi trepidations and concerns were magnified by Damascus' growing support for a number of Kurdish separatist movements and opposition groups operating within Iraq. The Syrians as well as the Iranians provided military and financial assistance to the National Progressive and Democratic Front; a coalition of various anti-Ba'thi organizations (which, as mentioned earlier, included the Marxist Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the United Kurdish Party (UKP), the National Democratic Party, the United Kurdish Socialist Party and the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP)).<sup>295</sup> In fact, in early 1982, Iraq's oil export capability was temporarily crippled when Kurdish guerrillas blew up the Kirkuk-Dortyol pipeline.<sup>296</sup> This was a serious blow for a country already \$20 billion in debt.<sup>297</sup> Hafez Assad's assistance to the Kurdish rebels was intended to encourage the insurgency in the northern provinces and tie down additional Iraqi troops in this region.<sup>298</sup>

According to Syrian and Iranian calculations, the combination of maintaining military pressure, waging economic warfare and aiding the Kurdish insurgency would lead to the deterioration of domestic conditions and the introduction of austerity measures by the regime. This would lead to the erosion of internal support for Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi Ba'th, eventually sparking domestic unrest and bringing about the overthrow of the government. The Iranians in particular believed that this would be the most practical method to score a political victory, without ever having to carry the war into Iraqi territory.<sup>299</sup>

Iran's military successes in April and May 1982, which culminated in the recovery of the Iranian port city of Khorramshahr, strengthened Syria's resolve to stand by and cooperate with her Persian ally. When it became evident that Iran would reject Arab peace offers and possibly invade Iraq, many Arab states called for a unified stand against Iran. However, Damascus prevented the convening of an Arab summit conference for this purpose in May 1982.<sup>300</sup> Iran's refusal to accept a negotiated settlement drew criticism from different corners of the Arab world, prompting even Algeria to distance herself from Tehran.<sup>301</sup> As the Islamic Republic became increasingly isolated in the Middle East, Iranian officials came to put greater emphasis and value on their relationship with Syria. Although Damascus declared that it would not endorse an Iranian invasion of Iraq, and threatened to re-evaluate its stance on the Gulf War, no shift occurred in the existing alliance.<sup>302</sup> In fact, after the



Israeli invasion of Lebanon on June 7, 1982, and Iran's decision to carry the war into Iraq the following month, the Syrian-Iranian alliance entered a new phase, which would mark the zenith of Syrian-Iranian cooperation in the Middle East.

## CONCLUSION

Despite ethnic dissimilarities and ideological incompatibilities, in the final analysis, it should come as no surprise that upon their ascent to power Ayatollah Khomeini and his inner circle cultivated close ties with the Syrian Ba'thi regime. Due to the poor state of Syrian-Iranian relations in the latter half of the 1970's, Assad had allowed the Shah's opponents to use Syria as a base for their activities. These included a number of individuals who eventually became some of Khomeini's close advisors and held senior positions in the revolutionary government. Following the ouster of the Shah, the Syrian-Iranian rapprochement was given further impetus by a convergence of interests and striking parallels in the foreign policies of both states. In a break from previous Iranian policy, the clerical regime drew closer to the radical Arab camp at a time when the Arab world was becoming more polarized and divided over issues such as the Camp David Accords and the Iranian Revolution. Similarly, Syria's relations with many of the moderate, pro-Western Arab states cooled. Links between Tehran and Damascus were further strengthened by the fact that the relations of both capitals with the United States deteriorated markedly in the period 1979-1980. Concomitantly, closer ties were developed with the Soviet Union.

The failure of the Syrian-Iraqi unity talks in mid-1979 and the growing tensions between Iran and Iraq facilitated the emergent Syrian-Iranian alliance. From the perspective of officials in Tehran and Damascus, close coordination of their policies was imperative, in order to contain Ba'thi Iraq. The showdown between Iran and Iraq, which eventually led to the outbreak of the First Persian Gulf War in September 1980, was the single most important factor the formalization of the Tehran-Damascus axis by early 1982. The conflict also radically transformed the calculus of power within the relationship. While Syria was more dependent on its links with Iran before the eruption of hostilities, in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion Iran found itself dependent to varying degrees on Damascus' diplomatic and military assistance.<sup>303</sup> Although the alliance became somewhat asymmetrical during the period 1980-1982, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 brought about some shifts in the power relationship and enhanced the position of both states in the Middle East (see Chapter 2 for more details and analysis). However, by the spring of 1982, the Syrians had not only succeeded in determining the extent and limits of cooperation in most spheres of common interest, but had also managed to extract tangible economic and political benefits from the Islamic Republic, to facilitate their realization of regional dominance. The Iranians, on the other hand, had even stronger incentives to continue their liaison with Syria, since the latter had been instrumental in turning the tide of the war against Iraq through the provision of war materiel, intelligence and operational bases, and the obstruction of a united anti-Iranian front through Syria's assiduous diplomatic efforts and posturing. In addition, the alliance had provided them with greater access to the Arab-Islamic world, broadened their narrow constituency and enabled them to dismiss accusations that Persian or Shi'ite interests were the primary forces shaping their foreign policy.

#### ENDNOTES

1. See Mohammad E. Ahrari, "Implications of Iranian Political Change for the Arab World," *Middle East Review*, Volume XVI, No. 3 (Spring 1984).
2. See *The New York Times*, September 25, 1980. According to the article, one Arab diplomat commenting on Syria and the Iran-Iraq war, stated that "in circles of solidarity, Arab solidarity comes first." He was confident that Syria would cease to be a dissenter, and fall into line eventually.
3. Shireen T. Hunter, "Syrian-Iranian Relations: An Alliance of Convenience or More?" *Middle East Insight*, June/July 1985, p. 31.
4. R. K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p.176.
5. Conversation with former Ambassador Jafar Ra'ed, London, April 1994. Ambassador Ra'ed was one of the top Arabists in the Imperial Iranian Foreign Ministry during the 1960's and 1970's, and later served as the Director of the Center for Arab and Iranian Studies (CAIS) in London, prior to his demise.
6. Conversation with Mr. Abbas Sayghal, London, April 1994. Mr. Sayghal was a career diplomat who served in the Imperial Iranian Foreign Service from 1931-1974. He was extremely knowledgeable about Arab-Iranian relations, and was stationed for more than three decades in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia.
7. Ra'ed, April 1994.
8. K.R. Singh, *Iran: Quest for Security* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Ltd., 1981), pp. 102-103.
9. Sayghal, April 1994, and *Relations of the Imperial Government of Iran with West Asian Countries and Egypt*, prepared by the Eighth Political Department (Tehran, Iran: Foreign Ministry, 1976), p. 28. (In Farsi)
10. Sayghal, April 1994.
11. Ibid.
12. Ra'ed, April 1994.
13. Classified Memorandum, marked "Secret," No. 145, from Ambassador Fereydoun Diba, Imperial Iranian Embassy in Damascus, Syria, to the Foreign Ministry in Tehran, Iran. Dated 22/4/43 (July 12, 1964), p. 6. (In Farsi)
14. Diba Memorandum, p. 1. For a general overview of the situation at the time, see Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 102, and Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1985) pp. 192-193.
15. Ibid.
16. Diba Memorandum, p. 7.
17. Ra'ed and Sayghal, April 1994. See also Shahram Chubin and Sepehr Zabih, *The Foreign Relations of Iran* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 15, 146, and K.R. Singh, *Iran: Quest for Security*, p. 119.
18. Sayghal, April 1994, and *Relations of the Imperial Government of Iran with West Asian Countries and Egypt*, p. 28.

19. *Relations of the Imperial Government of Iran with West Asian Countries and Egypt*, p. 29, and *Syria (A Country Study)*, prepared by the Institute for Political and International Studies (Tehran, Iran: Foreign Ministry, 1995), pp. 135-136. (In Farsi) During the Six-Day War, Iran also allowed Soviet transport aircraft to use Iranian airspace to resupply the Arab combatants, and subsequently condemned Israel's seizure of Arab territory in the United Nations. Conversation with former Imperial Iranian Foreign Minister Ardeshir Zahedi, Montreux, Switzerland, November 2000. Also see Nader Entessar, "The Lion and the Sphinx: Iranian-Egyptian Relations in Perspective," in *Iran and the Arab World*, ed. Hooshang Amirahmadi and Nader Entessar (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1993), p. 163.
20. Ra'ed, April 1994. Also see *Relations of the Imperial Government of Iran with West Asian Countries and Egypt*, p. 29.
21. Conversations with former Iranian Foreign Minister Zahedi, November 2000, and Ambassador Ra'ed, April 1994. According to Zahedi, Tehran was determined to take decisive action to prevent the overthrow of King Hussein.
22. Ra'ed, April 1994.
23. The Imperial Iranian Intelligence Service, SAVAK, supported and financed Kzar's operation, intended to overthrow the Iraqi Ba'thi regime. Confidential conversation with a former Iranian official with close links to SAVAK, London, March 1994. For more background information, see Nabeel A. Khoury, "The Pragmatic Trend in Inter-Arab Politics," *The Middle East Journal*, 36, No. 3 (1982), 379, and Eberhard Kienle, *Ba'th versus Ba'th: The Conflict between Syria and Iraq 1968-1989* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1990), pp. 71, 85.
24. A group of wounded Syrian officers and soldiers were flown to Iran and treated in Tehran hospitals. *Relations of the Imperial Government of Iran with West Asian Countries and Egypt*, p. 31. During the fighting, Iran once again permitted the Soviets to use Iranian airspace to resupply the Arabs, but subsequently reversed its position after coming under pressure from the Americans. Conversation with former Iranian Foreign Minister Ahmad Mirfenderski, Paris, December 1994, and confidential interview with a former Iranian official, London, March 1994. Furthermore, Ardeshir Zahedi explained that Iran condemned the continued occupation of Arab territories captured by Israel in 1967 at the United Nations. Conversation with former Iranian Foreign Minister Zahedi, November 2000. Also see Nader Entessar, "The Lion and the Sphinx: Iranian-Egyptian Relations in Perspective," in *Iran and the Arab World*, p. 165.
25. Ibid.
26. Conversation with former Ambassador Mohammad Poursartip, Iranian ambassador to Damascus from 1973-1977. Geneva, Switzerland, June 1997. Syria dispatched its own ambassador to Iran in 1974.
27. *Relations of the Imperial Government of Iran with West Asian Countries and Egypt*, p. 32, and *Syria (A Country Study)*, p. 136.
28. *Relations of the Imperial Government of Iran with West Asian Countries and Egypt*, p. 36.
29. Mohammad Ali Emami, *Politics and Government in Syria* (Tehran, Iran: Institute for Political and International Studies, 1997), pp. 234-235. (In Farsi) For details and in-depth analysis of the intensification of Syrian-Iraqi rivalry between 1972 and 1975, see Kienle, *Ba'th versus Ba'th*, pp. 61-86.
30. *Relations of the Imperial Government of Iran with West Asian Countries and Egypt*, pp. 34-36, and *Syria (A Country Study)*, pp. 136-137.
31. Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, California: University of

California Press, 1989), p. 353.

32. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, p. 176.

33. Yair Hirschfeld, "The Odd Couple: Ba'thist Syria and Khomeini's Iran," in *Syria Under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*, ed. Avner Yaniv and Moshe Ma'oz (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 119 and Martha Neff Kessler, *Syria: Fragile Mosaic of Power* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1987), pp. 86-87.

34. For a detailed account and analysis of the events in this period, see Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, Chapters 13-16.

35. Hirschfeld, p. 120.

36. Ibid. and Amazia Baram, "Ideology and Power Politics in Syrian-Iraqi Relations, 1968-1984," in *Syria Under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*, ed. Avner Yaniv and Moshe Ma'oz (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), pp. 129-130.

37. Hirschfeld, pp. 119-120.

38. Ibid., p. 120.

39. Baram, pp. 133-138 and Seale p. 334. For a detailed account of the Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement of 1978-1979, see Eberhard Kienle, *Ba'th v. Ba'th: The Conflict Between Syria and Iraq 1968 - 1989*, pp. 135-151.

40. Kessler, p. 86, Seale, p. 334, and Kienle pp. 135-136.

41. Baram, p. 156, and Seale, pp. 334-335. Almost a year later, on August 18, 1980, the Syrian-Iraqi rift was beyond doubt, when the Iraqi government summoned the chiefs of other Arab diplomatic missions in Baghdad to witness the removal of "large amounts of explosives, arms, and poisonous material from the Syrian embassy premises." Saddam Hussein accused Syria of having the intent to carry out acts of subversion and overthrow the regime. He declared the Syrian diplomats *persona non grata*, giving them forty-eight hours to leave the country. Assad repeatedly denied these charges, claiming the material had been planted in the embassy compound by the Iraqis. Damascus retaliated by expelling the Iraqi ambassador and his nineteen-man staff. This incident, one month before the outbreak of the First Gulf War, marked the culmination of a long process of alienation and recrimination, particularly by the Iraqi side. See Baram, p. 136.

42. Kessler, pp. 86-87. According to Teune and Synnestvedt, in certain cases, disappointing historical experiences may prevent alliance formation with states associated with those experiences. See Henry Teune and Sig Synnestvedt, "Measuring International Alignment," *Orbis Journal of World Affairs*, 9, No. 1 (1965), p. 189.

43. Seale, pp. 352-353.

44. BBC Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB), ME/6041/i February 13, 1979. For further details on Assad's message to Khomeini, see BBC SWB/ME/6042/A/5-6 February 14, 1979.

45. *The Guardian*, February 13, 1979. According to Dilip Hiro, Syria was the third country after the Soviet Union and Pakistan to recognize the revolutionary government in Iran (Conversation with Dilip Hiro, London, August 1994).

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. *The New York Times*, January 29, 1979.
49. BBC/SWB/ME/6039/A/12 February 10, 1979.
50. *The Daily Telegraph*, March 12, 1979.
51. Ibid.
52. Kienle, p. 140.
53. Seale, pp. 352-353.
54. For examples of the rapprochement with the Lebanese Shi'ites and Libya, see BBC/SWB/ME/6061/A/7 March 8, 1979, and BBC/SWB/ME/6100/A/10 April 25, 1979, respectively. Refer to BBC/SWB/ME/6063/i March 10, 1979, BBC/SWB/ME/6064/A/1 March 12, 1979, and BBC/SWB/ME/6075/A/4 March 24, 1979 for the simultaneous deterioration of Syrian and Iranian ties with Morocco in the spring of 1979.
55. BBC/SWB/ME/6106/i May 2, 1979. For full text of Iranian foreign ministry statement on the severance of diplomatic ties with Egypt, see BBC/SWB/ME/6107/A/7-8 May 2, 1979.
56. BBC/SWB/ME/6084/A/12 April 4, 1979.
57. *Al-Bath*, June 12, 1979.
58. BBC/SWB/ME/6145/A/7 June 19, 1979.
59. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1978-1979*, p. 440.
60. Seale, pp. 353-354.
61. Hunter, p. 32.
62. Ibid. and Seale, p. 353.
63. Seale, p. 353.
64. Hunter, p. 31.
65. Ibid.
66. Robert G. Darius, "Khomeini's Policy Toward the Mideast," in *Gulf Security into the 1980's: Perceptual and Strategic Dimensions*, ed. Robert G. Darius, John W. Amos II, Ralph H. Magnus (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1984), p. 38. Ayatollah Sadeq Khalkhali during a visit to the United Arab Emirates in May 1979, declared that the Persian Gulf should be called the "Muslim" Gulf. See *Kayhan*, May 29, 1979.
67. Hunter, p. 32.
68. *Al-Bath*, October 8, 1980.
69. Darius, p. 38 and Fred Halliday, "Iranian Foreign Policy Since 1979: Internationalism and Nationalism in the Islamic Revolution," in *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, ed. Juan R. I. Cole and Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 94-95.
70. Seale. pp. 355-356.

71. Nabeel A. Khoury, "The Pragmatic Trend in Inter-Arab Politics," *The Middle East Journal*, 36, No. 3 (1982) 380. According to Seale, Assad was a close friend of the Lebanese Shi'ite leader, Imam Musa al-Sadr, who was the cousin and the brother-in-law of the prominent Iraqi Shi'ite religious leader, Ayatollah Baqir al-Sadr. In April 1980, Baqir al-Sadr was executed by the Iraqi government after widespread disturbances in predominantly Shi'ite areas. This issue became a bone of contention between Hafez Assad and Saddam Hussein. See Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, p. 357.
72. Seale, pp. 355-357.
73. BBC/SWB/ME/6196/A/7-8 August 17, 1979.
74. Seale, p. 353 and *Kayhan*, August 19, 1979.
75. Ibid. and *Kayhan*, August 19, 1979. According to Seale, "Even while the Shah was still in power [Assad] gave a helping hand to some of Khomeini's lieutenants – who were later to serve as ministers of the Islamic Republic. Qotbzadeh, for example, was given a Syrian passport which allowed him to conduct his anti-Shah activities in the disguise of Paris correspondent of the Damascus daily *Al-Thawrah*." See Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, p. 352.
76. *Kayhan*, August 19, 1979.
77. BBC/SWB/ME/6198/A/6-7 August 20, 1979.
78. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1978-1979*, pp. 440-441.
79. BBC/SWB/ME/6231/A/3-4 September 28, 1979.
80. Barry Rubin, "Iran's Revolution and Persian Gulf Instability," in *The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts*, ed. Shirin Taher-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983), pp. 126-127.
81. For instances of Gulf Arab criticism of Iran, see the Bahraini daily, *Al-Adwa*, September 22, 1979, and the Kuwaiti daily, *Al-Ra'y Al-Amm*, September 25 and 27, 1979.
82. BBC/SWB/ME/6212/A/7 September 6, 1979, and BBC/SWB/ME/6217/A/3 September 12, 1979.
83. BBC/SWB/ME/6238/A/6 October 6, 1979.
84. BBC/SWB/ME/6239/A/3-5 October 8, 1979.
85. See *The Financial Times*, October 10, 1979, Xinhua News Agency Press Release, October 11, 1979, and BBC/SWB/ME/6242/A/9 October 11, 1979.
86. *Tishrin*, October 17, 1979, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1978-1979*, p. 441.
87. BBC/SWB/ME/6266/A/9 November 8, 1979.
88. *The Washington Post*, November 17, 1979.
89. Ibid.
90. BBC/SWB/ME/6276/A/8 November 20, 1979 and BBC/SWB/ME/6280/A/10 November 24, 1979.
91. BBC/SWB/ME/6238/A/6-7 November 28, 1979.

92. BBC/SWB/ME/6287/A/7-8 December 3, 1979.
93. Ibid.
94. *The Daily Telegraph*, March 3, 1980.
95. See Jacob Goldberg, "The Shi'i Minority in Saudi Arabia," in *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, ed. Juan R.I. Cole and Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 239, and "Saudi Arabia and the Iranian Revolution: The Religious Dimension," in *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, ed. David Menashri (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990), p. 160.
96. BBC/SWB/ME/6296/A/3 December 13, 1979.
97. *Al-Nahar*, November 1, 1979.
98. BBC/SWB/ME/6263/A/3 November 5, 1979.
99. BBC/SWB/ME/6272/A/10 November 15, 1979 and BBC/SWB/ME/6103/A/8 April 28, 1979. In reality, the Libyans had executed Ayatollah Musa Sadr during his visit to Libya the previous year. Moreover, Ayatollah Khomeini had had an indirect role in the elimination of Musa Sadr, whom he despised. As a pragmatic leader who was trying to mobilize and empower the Lebanese Shi'ites, and change the political status quo in Lebanon, Musa Sadr throughout the years had accepted financial assistance from radical states, but also from other sources, including the Shah of Iran and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), to improve conditions for his constituency. Khomeini resented what he interpreted as Musa Sadr's deviant conduct and intentionally misinformed Qadhafi that Musa Sadr had used financial aid provided by Libya for his own personal gain. Confidential conversation with a former Iranian official intimately involved in Lebanese affairs.
100. BBC/SWB/ME/6305/A/6 December 28, 1979.
101. BBC/SWB/ME/6320/A/4-5 January 16, 1980.
102. *Middle East International*, May 23, 1980.
103. *Middle East International*, November 23, 1979.
104. Ibid.
105. In a radio commentary broadcast from Baghdad on January 16, the argument was put forth that, "...Khomeini should not be worried about religion and its men in Iraq because the Arabs and Islam are one and Islam was introduced to all the world's peoples, including the Persian people, by the Arabs. The rulers [in Tehran] must put an end to their arrogance and frivolity before it is too late and matters get out of hand." See BBC/SWB/ME/6322/A/9 January 18, 1980.
106. *Al-Watan Al-Arabi*, January 31, 1980.
107. For the full text of the Pan-Arab Declaration, see BBC/SWB/ME/6343/A/1 February 13, 1980.
108. *The Middle East*, February 1980.
109. BBC/SWB/ME/6364/A/4 March 7, 1980.
110. *The Times*, March 20, 1980.
111. See BBC/SWB/ME/6365/A/3 March 8, 1980, BBC/SWB/ME/6366/A/7 March 10, 1980, and BBC/SWB/ME/6367/A/5 March 11, 1980.

112. BBC/SWB/ME/6388/A/3-4 April 4, 1980.
113. BBC/SWB/ME/6390/A/4-5 April 9, 1980.
114. BBC/SWB/ME/6394/A/2 April 14, 1980. Iran claimed that King Hussein had arranged a secret meeting between U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and Saddam Hussein on the Iraqi-Jordanian border earlier in the year, resulting in the declaration of the Pan-Arab Charter by the Iraqi leader. For more details on Brzezinski's alleged secret visit to Iraq, see Karen Elliot House, "Looking for Friendships in the Persian Gulf," *The Wall Street Journal*, February 8, 1980, and Kenneth R. Timmerman, *The Death Lobby: How the West Armed Iraq* (London: Bantam Books, 1992), pp. 112-114.
115. BBC/SWB/ME/6392/A/4 April 11, 1980.
116. For additional information on clashes between pro-Iranian and pro-Iraqi militias in Lebanon in the period before the outbreak of the First Persian Gulf War, see BBC/SWB/ME/6397/A/7 April 17, 1980, BBC/SWB/ME/6398/A/7-8 April 18, 1980, *The Times*, May 29 and 31, 1980, and *The New York Times*, April 27 and June 11, 1980.
117. *The New York Times*, April 26, 1980.
118. *The New York Times*, April 28, 1980 and BBC/SWB/ME/6406/A/5 April 28, 1980.
119. *The New York Times*, April 27, 1980.
120. *Le Monde*, April 29, 1980.
121. At a press conference held in Beirut on April 29, 1980, Khaddam argued that "We are all required to stand at the side of the Iranian revolution to face this US onslaught, which is aimed against the Arabs as much as it is aimed against Iran. This onslaught is aimed at eliminating the Palestinian issue and the Arab nation. It is also aimed at spreading full US control over the Arab world." See BBC/SWB/ME/6409/A/4 May 1, 1980.
122. *The Sunday Times*, May 4, 1980.
123. *The Sunday Times*, May 18, 1980. According to the article written by Anthony Terry, Syrian elite troops had been sent to Iran to support the Iranian forces in border clashes against the Iraqis. However, the report seems to be highly suspect. Iran at the time did not need foreign soldiers to conduct operations and skirmishes against the Iraqis. A more plausible explanation for the Syrian presence is that they were there in an advisory capacity since they were quite familiar with Iraqi tactics and Soviet-made weaponry, which the Iraqis utilized and the Iranians were trying to integrate in their armed forces. This is supported by Claudia Wright's account of the Syrian troop presence in Iran before the outbreak of the war. See her article, "Implications of the Iran-Iraq War," in *Foreign Affairs*, 59, No. 2 (Winter 1980-1981).
124. *The Middle East*, July 1980.
125. Ibid.
126. Ibid.
127. See Baram, p. 136, BBC/SWB/ME/6502/A/11 August 20, 1980, and BBC/SWB/ME/6505/A/2 August 23, 1980.
128. BBC/SWB/ME/6507/A/8-9 August 27, 1980.
129. BBC/SWB/ME/6520/A/7-9 September 11, 1980.



130. *The Middle East*, October 1980.
131. BBC/SWB/ME/6525/i September 17, 1980.
132. BBC/SWB/ME/6523/i September 15, 1980.
133. BBC/SWB/ME/6520/A/1-2 September 11, 1980, and BBC/SWB/ME/6525/A/2 September 17, 1980.
134. Interview with Kenneth R. Timmerman of the US Congressional Research Service (and author of two books on Western policy towards Iraq and Iran, *Fanning the Flames*, and *The Death Lobby: How the West Armed Iraq*) on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) *Frontline* television documentary program, entitled "The Arming of Saudi Arabia," first aired on American television on February 16, 1993. Also see the transcript of the *Frontline* program, p. 5.
135. See Claudia Wright, "Implications of the Iran-Iraq War," in *Foreign Affairs*, (Winter 1980-1981), 281-282.
136. See Edgar O'Ballance, *The Gulf War* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988), p. 12, and Shahram Chubin & Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), p. 29.
137. *The Daily Telegraph*, September 25, 1980.
138. *The International Herald Tribune*, September 26, 1980.
139. BBC/SWB/ME/6532/i September 25, 1980.
140. See Seale, p. 357, BBC/SWB/ME/6534/i September 27, 1980, and BBC/SWB/ME/6536/A/2 September 30, 1980.
141. *The International Herald Tribune*, September 30, 1980.
142. See *The Guardian*, September 24, 1980 and *The Daily Telegraph*, October 7, 1980.
143. *The Daily Telegraph*, October 8, 1980.
144. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1979-1989*, pp. 22-23.
145. Seale, p. 357.
146. Hunter, p. 32.
147. *The Guardian*, October 4, 1980.
148. Seale, p. 357.
149. *Al-Ba'ath*, October 5, 1980.
150. *The Washington Post*, October 8, 1980 and *Middle East International*, October 24, 1980. According to former Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, although Syria sent arms and military advisors to assist the Iranian war effort, Syrian troops never participated in the fighting against Iraq. Conversation with Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, Versailles, France, December 1994.
151. *The Washington Post*, October 8, 1980 and BBC/SWB/ME/6543/A/4 October 8, 1980.
152. *The Daily Telegraph*, October 7, 1980 and *The Guardian*, October 9, 1980.

153. *The Washington Post*, October 11, 1980.
154. Seale, p. 358.
155. *The Financial Times*, November 1, 1980 and *The Daily Telegraph*, October 7, 1980. During the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Syrian wounded were flown to Iran and treated there.
156. Amos, p. 66.
157. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
158. *The Daily Telegraph*, October 7, 1980. In a meeting with the Joint Chief of Staff Fallahi, Syrian Ambassador Yunis informed him that according to their estimates, Iraqi was depleting its ammunition stocks very quickly. This posed a major problem for the Iraqis, since the Kremlin had halted all military shipments to Iraq after the outbreak of the conflict.
159. *The Daily Telegraph*, October 29, 1980 and O'Ballance, p.53.
160. BBC/SWB/ME/6546/A/1-2 October 11, 1980.
161. *The New York Times*, October 12, 1980 and BBC/SWB/ME/6547/A/4-5 October 13, 1980.
162. BBC/SWB/ME/6547/A/5-7 October 13, 1980.
163. *Al-Jazirah*, October 12, 1980, and BBC/SWB/ME/6561/A/13 October 29, 1980.
164. BBC/SWB/ME/6555/i October 22, 1980 and SWB/ME/6564/i November 1, 1980. On November 7, Assad delivered a strong attack against Saddam Hussein's conduct in an address at a youth conference. Referring to the Iranian Revolution, he posed the question, "Is it not our right to ask why this revolution is under attack? Why was war suddenly launched against this revolution? Given the large, broad significance of this revolution and the huge gains achieved for us, the Arabs, by this revolution, is it not our duty to ask why war was launched against this revolution? If the matter is one of Arab rights, why were we not consulted? Are we not Arabs? Are we not concerned with every Arab right?" See BBC/SWB/ME/6571/A/4 November 10, 1980.
165. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1980-1981*, pp. 257-258.
166. Yosef Olmert, "Iranian-Syrian Relations: Between Islam and Realpolitik," in *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, ed. David Menashri (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990), p. 174.
167. See Mark A. Heller, *The Iran-Iraq War: Implications for Third Parties* (Tel Aviv, Israel: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 1984). pp. 29-30 and Ralph King, "The Iran-Iraq War: The Political Implications," *Adelphi Papers*, No. 219, Spring 1987, pp. 43-44.
168. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1979-1980*, p. 9.
169. *The Daily Telegraph*, October 16, 1980.
170. BBC/SWB/ME/6575/A/1 November 14, 1980.
171. *The Washington Post*, November 14, 1980.
172. *The New York Times*, November 13, 1980 and BBC/SWB/ME/6574/i November 13, 1980.
173. BBC/SWB/ME/6577/i November 17, 1980.

174. *The Guardian*, November 17, 1980.
175. *Dawn*, November 18, 1980.
176. *The Guardian*, November 20, 1980. The defection of two Syrian air force pilots who flew their planes to Jordan during this time aggravated the situation even more.
177. *The New York Times*, November 20, 1980.
178. BBC/SWB/ME/6580/i November 20, 1980.
179. BBC/SWB/ME/6582/i November 22, 1980.
180. *The New York Times*, November 21, 1980.
181. *The Financial Times*, November 22, 1980 and *The Guardian*, November 23, 1980.
182. *The Financial Times*, November 24, 1980 and BBC/SWB/ME/6585/A/6-7 November 26, 1980.
183. *The Times*, November 25, 1980.
184. *The Financial Times*, November 25, 1980.
185. *The Observer News Service*, November 28, 1980.
186. *The Times*, November 28, 1980.
187. *The Times*, November 26, 1980.
188. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1979-1980*, p. 9, and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, November 27, 1980.
189. *The International Herald Tribune*, November 27, 1980, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 28, 1980.
190. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1979-1980*, p.38.
191. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 28, 1980. During the summit conference, King Hussein held private talks with Saddam Hussein on developments in the Gulf war. See *The International Herald Tribune*, November 27, 1980.
192. *The Times*, November 28, 1980.
193. See *The Times*, *The Financial Times*, and *The Daily Telegraph*, November 28, 1980, and BBC/SWB/ME/6588/A/2 November 29, 1980.
194. *The Observer News Service*, November 28, 1980.
195. *The Sunday Telegraph*, November 30, 1980.
196. BBC/SWB/ME/6593/A/5 December 5, 1980, and BBC/SWB/ME/6602/i December 16, 1980.
197. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1979-1980*, p. 9.
198. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
199. After several failed attempts to mediate between the two belligerents, Yasser Arafat's PLO also

judged it prudent to throw in its lot with the anti-Iranian Arab camp.

200. Seale claims that those who aspire to control the Middle East must first win over Syria. According to him, "There are many reasons for this view: one is the strategic position of Syria, guarding the northeastern approaches to Egypt, the overland route to Iraq from the Mediterranean, the head of the Arabian peninsula and the northern frontier of the Arab World." Furthermore, "Syria held the key to the struggle for local primacy... Whoever controlled Syria or enjoyed her special friendship could isolate [other Arab states] and need bow to no other combination of Arab states." See Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 1-2.

201. Chubin and Tripp, p. 181.

202. Hirschfeld, pp. 108-109. The Minister of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Mohsen Rafiqdoust, explained that the Syrian-Iranian liaison is "effective in dispelling the misconception perpetuated by imperialism which attempts to depict the war as an Arab-Persian conflict and not a war against oppression." See Chubin and Tripp, pp. 181 and 278.

203. BBC/SWB/ME/6609/A/5 December 24, 1980. In the immediate aftermath of Iran's Islamic revolution, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan al-Muslimin) had appealed to Ayatollah Khomeini for support against the Syrian Ba'thi regime. This overture to win Iranian support coincided with the Brotherhood's renewed efforts in the spring of 1979 to oust Assad from power. The Muslim militants initiated a widespread campaign of terror and violence aimed at government and party officials. As it turned out, Iran ignored the Brethren's calls for assistance. Between 1980 and 1982, as the struggle between the Muslim Brethren and the Syrian government intensified, the Iranian state-controlled media maintained a news blackout on events in Syria. Iranian officials only occasionally criticized the Muslim Brethren. However, after the massive uprising in Hama led by the Ikhwan in February 1982, which was ruthlessly crushed by the Syrian army, the Iranian government publicly condoned Assad's suppression of the revolt. The Iranian foreign ministry issued a statement officially condemning the Ikhwan for having allowed itself to become a functional ally of the "Zionist entity and Hashemite Jordan." It should be noted that, since the late 1960's, the Syrian Ikhwan's principal source of support had been the Iraqi Ba'th. According to former Iranian President Bani-Sadr, there was never a serious debate among the Iranian leadership about backing the Syrian Ikhwan since there was consensus that the movement had compromised its Islamic credentials by forging close links with Jordan and Iraq, and had become a "stooge of the West." Conversation with Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, Versailles, France, December 1994. See also Hanna Batatu, "Syria's Muslim Brethren," *MERIP Reports*, November/December 1982, p. 13, and Richard Cottam, "Iran - Motives Behind its Foreign Policy," *Survival*, 28, No. 6 (1986), 488-489.

204. BBC/SWB/ME/6643/A/4 February 7, 1981.

205. *The Observer News Service*, March 2, 1980, and BBC/SWB/ME/6643/A/4 February 7, 1981.

206. BBC/SWB/ME/6644/A/2 February 9, 1981 and BBC/SWB/ME/6659/A/8 February 26, 1981.

207. *Tishrin*, February 21, 1981. Syria had initially hoped to use the Jordanian diplomat as a bargaining chip to seek the release of the Syrian agents in return for his freedom.

208. For additional information see *The International Herald Tribune*, February 19, 1980, *The Daily Telegraph*, February 5, 1980, and BBC/SWB/ME/6638/i February 2, 1981.

209. *The Financial Times*, February 3, 1981.

210. BBC/SWB/ME/6668/A/3 March 9, 1981.

211. BBC/ME/6660/A/10 February 27, 1981. During their meetings with the Syrian Minister of Religious Trusts, Dr. Mohammed al-Khatib, he declared his country's willingness to fight on the side

of Iran against "imperialism and Saddam's regime," if such a request was made.

212. *The Observer News Service*, April 8, 1981, and *The Financial Times*, April 1, 1981. Damascus denounced Sadat's policy of aiding Iraq against the Iranian revolutionaries. See BBC/SWB/ME/6689/i April 2, 1981.

213. William O. Staudenmaier, "A Strategic Analysis," in *The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts*, ed. Shirin Taher-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983), p. 43 and BBC/SWB/ME/6693/A/10 April 7, 1981.

214. BBC/SWB/ME/6693/A/10 April 7, 1981.

215. Anthony A. Cordesman, "Lessons of the Iran-Iraq War: Part Two," *Armed Forces Journal International*, June 1982, p. 84. and Staudenmaier, p. 43.

216. David Evans and Richard Company, "The Lessons of Conflict," *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 1984, p. 31.

217. Dilip Hiro, "Chronicle of the Gulf War," in *MERIP Reports*, July/September 1984, p.7. While Baghdad admitted to the loss of only one aircraft in the attack (see BBC/SWB/ME/6695/A/10 April 9, 1981), the Iraqi Mujahedin estimated that some 60 warplanes were destroyed (see BBC/SWB/ME/6704/A/6 April 22, 1981).

218. BBC/SWB/ME/6743/A/9 May 23, 1981.

219. For a brief account of the impact of the domestic political power struggle on the war, see O'Ballance, pp. 65-66.

220. For a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the power struggle in Iran, see Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 125-165.

221. *The Financial Times*, April 22, 1981.

222. For examples, refer to *The Egyptian Gazette*, April 9, 1981, *The Daily Mail*, April 20, 1981, and BBC/SWB/ME/6704/A/6-7 April 22, 1981.

223. According to Dr. Ahmed Hashim, Research Associate at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the Iranian air force had a sufficient number of aircraft to fly air support missions in the early stages of the war, and therefore was not in need of Syrian assistance in this respect. Conversation with Dr. Ahmed Hashim, London. August 1994. This is supported by the confession of an Iranian air force pilot captured by the Iraqis in May 1981, who stated that the Iranians had ruled out Syrian air cover for fear of confusing Soviet-made Syrian planes with those of Iraq. Furthermore, Syrian and Iraqi markings were quite similar, therefore increasing the probability of the two being mistaken for one another. See BBC/SWB/ME/6731/A/9 May 23, 1981. Former Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr also confirmed that Syrian warplanes never participated in combat missions with the Iranian air force. However, the Syrians allowed Iranian combat aircraft to use Syrian airspace. Conversation with Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, Versailles, France, December 1994.

224. The reticence of the Iranian government to condemn the Ikhwan officially could partly be attributed to the fact that there was a general perception among the public that the Syrian Brethren were a movement with solid and immaculate Islamic credentials. Therefore, the situation in Syria presented the Iranian clerics with somewhat of a dilemma. In addition, not only did the Muslim Brethren use the same language against Assad as Khomeini had used against the Shah, but more importantly many of Khomeini's prominent aides, including former prime minister Mahdavi-Kani, and Islamic judges Sadeq Khalkhali, Mohammad Gailani and Assadollah Lajevardi were once members of the Iranian version of the Brethren, called Fadayeen-e Islam. Its founder, Navab-Safavi, had had close ties with the Brethren in Egypt and Syria during the 1940's and 1950's. See "Syria Violence

Seen Posing Dilemma for Tehran," London, Statement Released in English, *Iran Press Service*, No. 60, February 25, 1982.

225. BBC/SWB/ME/6704/A/6 April 22, 1981.

226. BBC/SWB/ME/6745/A/13 June 10, 1981.

227. BBC/SWB/ME/6745/A/14 June 10, 1981.

228. BBC/SWB/ME/6751/A/12 June 17, 1981.

229. BBC/SWB/ME/6794/i August 6, 1981. According to former Iranian President Bani-Sadr, he was against a strategic partnership with Syria due to the nature and ideology of its regime which was not that different from Saddam Hussein's, and instead favored a limited relationship for tactical purposes. He approved cooperation in the realm of military affairs after the Iraqi invasion in order to safeguard national security. Furthermore, he believed that an alliance with Assad's dictatorship would discredit the Islamic Republic of Iran in the eyes of other revolutionary movements in the world. However, Khomeini was a strong advocate of an Iranian-Syrian alliance to humble Iraq, and after Bani-Sadr's ouster cooperative ties were expanded and eventually formalized by March 1982. Conversation with Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, Versailles, France, December 1994.

230. BBC/SWB/ME/6810/A/6 August 25, 1981.

231. *Al-Thawrah*, September 23, 1981.

232. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1981-1982*, p. 229.

233. *The Financial Times*, October 2, 1981.

234. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, October 8, 1981.

235. Ibid.

236. *The Guardian*, October 5, 1981.

237. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1981-1982*, p. 230.

238. See *The Egyptian Gazette*, October 6, 1981, BBC/SWB/ME/6819/A/6 September 4, 1981, BBC/SWB/ME/6846/A/13 October 6, 1981, and BBC/SWB/ME/6855/A/11 October 16, 1981. In fact, the Iraqi News Agency (INA) claimed on September 2 that the Al-Walid airbase had been attacked again by Iranian warplanes. If this was the case, the number of planes involved was probably fewer, and smaller losses were incurred by the Iraqis in comparison to the April 4 raid.

239. *The Financial Times*, October 7, 1981.

240. BBC/SWB/ME/6848/A/15-16 October 8, 1981.

241. For details on Syrian and Iranian responses to the Fahd Plan and the Fez summit, see *The Daily Telegraph*, November 16, 17, and 19, 1981, *The Guardian*, November 21 and 27, 1981, *The International Herald Tribune*, November 21/22, 1981, *Tishrin*, November 6, 22, and 28, 1981, and *The Daily Telegraph*, December 31, 1981.

242. *The Financial Times*, December 2, 1981, BBC/SWB/ME/6876/A/13 November 10, 1981, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1981-1982*, p. 230.

243. BBC/SWB/ME/6906/i December 15, 1981.

244. See *The Financial Times*, December 21, 1981, and *The Guardian*, December 21, 1981.
245. BBC/SWB/ME/6912/A/10 December 22, 1981.
246. *The International Herald Tribune*, December 29, 1981, and *The Guardian*, December 28, 1981.
247. *The International Herald Tribune*, December 21, 1981.
248. O'Ballance, p. 69.
249. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
250. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, December 25, 1981.
251. *Ibid.*, and O'Ballance, p. 73.
252. See *The Guardian*, December 17, 1981, BBC/SWB/ME/6908/A/8 December 17, 1981, King, p. 41, and Olmert p. 174.
253. *The Daily Telegraph*, December 25, 1981.
254. *The Daily Telegraph*, December 28, 1981.
255. For details see *The International Herald Tribune*, *The Financial Times*, and *The Egyptian Gazette*, December 30, 1981, *Le Monde*, December 31, 1981, and BBC/SWB/ME/6917/A/6 January 1, 1982.
256. *The International Herald Tribune*, December 30, 1981.
257. *Ibid.*
258. BBC/SWB/ME/6918/A/3-4 January 4, 1982. In a news conference on January 7, 1982, Iranian President Khamene'i went so far as to deny that the topic of Syrian mediation and peace talks had come up during Velayati's visit to Syria. Also see BBC/SWB/ME/6932/A/7 January 9, 1982.
259. O'Ballance, p. 69.
260. BBC/SWB/ME/6918/A/13 January 4, 1982.
261. *Ibid.* On January 1, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ahmad Azizi, in response to reports about the Syrian-Kuwaiti mediation effort, issued a statement indicating that "the recent victories in the battlefronts and the clear position of the Islamic Republic concerning the war gave Iran no reason to have any special talks with any country to end the war." See BBC/SWB/ME/6918/A/4 January 4, 1982.
262. *Middle East International*, January 15, 1982.
263. BBC/SWB/ME/6927/A/2 January 14, 1982.
264. BBC/SWB/ME/6927/i January 14, 1982.
265. BBC/SWB/ME/6919/i January 5, 1982.
266. See BBC/SWB/ME/6924/A/6 January 11, 1982. Ramadan addressed volunteers from eight Arab countries (Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco and the Sudan) leaving for the warfront "to take part in the just pan-Arab battle Iraq [was] waging against the Persian enemy."

267. See *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1981-1982*, p. 232, and BBC/SWB/ME/6942/A/2 February 1, 1982.
268. *The Guardian*, February 1, 1982.
269. *Al-Bath*, January 29, 1982.
270. *The Guardian*, February 1, 1982.
271. BBC/SWB/ME/6942/A/4 February 1, 1982.
272. *The Guardian*, February 1, 1982, and BBC/SWB/ME/6942/A/6 February 1, 1982.
273. *The Guardian*, February 1, 1982.
274. *The International Herald Tribune*, March 1, 1982.
275. For a good illustration of pro-Iraqi Jordanian propaganda, see BBC/SWB/ME/6950/A/1 February 10, 1982.
276. BBC/SWB/ME/6965/A/3 February 27, 1982.
277. *Middle East International*, March 12, 1982.
278. *Le Monde*, March 16, 1982, and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, March 18, 1982.
279. Under the terms of the commercial protocol, Iran's Minister of Commerce Mr. Askar-Owliadi explained: "the exports of Iran to Syria will include pistachio nuts, dates, shortening, saffron, caviar, shrimp, tiles, hygiene necessities, buses, heat register pressure tanks, radiators, wall paper, elevators, hides, Formalin, plant insecticides, raisins and caraway seeds. The imports to Iran from Syria will include barley, lentils, raw materials for textiles, chemicals, pharmaceutical raw materials, glass, fabrics and electrical equipment." See *Ettela'at*, March 17, 1982.
280. Ibid.
281. Ibid.
282. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, p. 81.
283. Ibid.
284. *Middle East International*, April 9, 1982, and O'Ballance, pp. 79-82.
285. *Middle East International*, April 9, 1982.
286. BBC/SWB/ME/6994/i April 2, 1982.
287. *Middle East International*, April 9, 1982.
288. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, p. 178.
289. Heller, p. 25. The pipeline was closed down hours after the arrival of the first tanker laden with Iranian oil in Banias. See *Middle East International*, April 23, 1982. The Iraqis claimed that Syria was losing \$127.5 million in transit fees by shutting the pipeline. See BBC/SWB/ME/7003/A/4-5 April 16, 1982.
290. Chubin & Tripp, pp. 179-180, and Hirschfeld, p. 108.



291. Iran had knocked out Iraq's oil facilities in the southern part of the country and in the Gulf during the early days of the war.

292. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, p. 71. The plans to build an oil pipeline to the Jordanian port of Aqaba were scrapped later on. For more details, see Frederick W. Axelgard, "The United States-Iraqi Rapprochement," in *Sources of Domestic and Foreign Policy in Iraq*, ed. Z. Michael Szaz (Washington, D.C.: The American Foreign Policy Institute, 1986), pp. 50-51. The Iraqis responded to the Syrian action by asking the Arab states to impose sanctions on Syria. See Interview with Iraqi Oil Minister Tayih Abd al-Karim in the *Middle East Economic Survey*, April 18, 1982.

293. Chubin & Tripp, p. 180, and Hirschfeld, p. 107. Also see BBC/SWB/ME/7002/A/8 April 15, 1982, BBC/SWB/ME/7012/A/3 April 27, 1982, and BBC/SWB/ME/7041/A/3 June 2, 1982.

294. Chubin and Tripp, p. 180.

295. Hirschfeld, p. 107. In May 1981, Assad offered PUK leader Jalal Talabani commitments for arms and military advisors. In addition, the Syrians provided support for the Shi'ite opposition groups within Iraq. They created Shi'ite cells in the Iraqi Ba'th and infiltrated the husseiniyahs. The underground activities of such groups as al-Da'wa, the Iraqi Mujahidin, and the Movement of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq were partially financed by Damascus. See Hirschfeld, p. 107, and Amos, p. 53. For more details on Syrian-Iranian assistance to Iraqi Kurdish groups, also see Edward Mortimer, *Faith and Power: The Politics of Islam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), pp. 368 and 373.

296. Heller, p. 25.

297. Chubin and Tripp, p. 180.

298. Hirschfeld, p. 107.

299. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

300. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

301. *Ibid.*

302. King, p. 42.

303. This view is also shared by Hazem Saghiyeh of *Al-Hayat*, who believes that immediately after the 1979 Revolution Syria was more eager to cultivate close ties with Iran, but subsequent to the 1980 Iraqi invasion Tehran had a greater interest in cementing relations with Damascus. Conversation with Hazem Saghiyeh, London, May 1994.

**THE ACHIEVEMENTS AND LIMITS OF SYRIAN-IRANIAN POWER:  
THE STRUGGLE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST 1982-1985**

**INTRODUCTION**

By the end of May 1982, the Syrian-Iranian alliance entered a new phase, which would be marked by close cooperation and intensive efforts to respond to new challenges not only in the Gulf region, but also and more importantly in the eastern Mediterranean. This period can be delineated approximately from June 1982 to March 1985 - a three-year period which was one of the most critical periods in the modern history of the Middle East.

In reality, this particular phase can be characterized as the zenith of the Syrian-Iranian axis in the region, but also paradoxically as one of lost opportunities - which demonstrated the limits of its power and sowed the seeds of decline for the Tehran-Damascus partnership. The month of June 1982 was an extremely critical period in the historiography of the contemporary Middle East - for it was at this vital juncture that Israel invaded Lebanon and engaged the Syrian armed forces in what became the fifth Arab-Israeli War, and concurrently Iran, having succeeded in turning the tide of the Persian Gulf War in its favor (with the expulsion of the Iraqis from most of its territory), decided in the same month to carry the war into Iraq.

Despite the wealth of literature on these two conflicts, very little research and analysis has been done on the interconnection between the events and decision-making processes which went on in the spring of 1982 in Baghdad, Tel Aviv, Damascus and Tehran. It will be demonstrated in the following analysis that policymakers in Tel Aviv and Baghdad hoped that an Israeli-Syrian confrontation would result in the diminution of Syrian power in the region. However, Hafez Assad's brinkmanship in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion not only thwarted Israeli and Iraqi calculations, but also hindered the Reagan administration's policies in the Middle East. Therefore, much to the chagrin of his opponents, Assad's prestige and influence grew noticeably. In addition to frustrating Israeli and American designs in the area, the Lebanon War drew Syria and Iran closer than before - contrary to the hopes and expectations of the Iraqi leadership. It is highly improbable that Iran would have altered its decision to invade Iraq in July 1982 if the Israelis had not initiated hostilities in Lebanon. On the other hand, it will be argued that, had events played out differently, Tehran might have reconsidered the wisdom of continuing the Gulf War and instead might have dispatched a sizeable military force to Lebanon to fight alongside the Syrians. In the words of Iran scholar R. K. Ramazani "the truism that all things in the Middle East are interconnected is one that statesmen and scholars alike ignore at their own peril."<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is provide a detailed chronology of the events and in-depth analysis of the impact of the Lebanon War on the evolution of the Syrian-Iranian alliance. It will set out to explain how policymakers in Damascus and Tehran coordinated their policies in as much as they could, and took up the challenge to expel the Israeli and Western forces from Lebanon between 1982 and 1985. Furthermore, it will be demonstrated that, once the Islamic Republic of Iran carried the war into Iraq, it had only a brief window of opportunity to defeat its foe decisively on the

battlefield. The argument will be put forth that this chance was lost by early 1984, due to the drastic shifts in the configuration of forces in the Middle East. The US-Iraqi rapprochement, Egypt's reintegration into the Arab world and the emergence of the Baghdad-Amman-Cairo axis (all having been motivated to varying degrees by the success of the Syrian-Iranian axis and its potential to exert even greater regional power and influence) ensured that, at the very least, Iraq would be able to stave off defeat in the Gulf War. The lack of consensus within Iran's political and military leadership regarding the conduct and objectives of the invasion of Iraq also had an enormous impact on Iran's failure to exploit fully Iraq's vulnerability between 1982 and 1983. By the time of Iran's first major offensive in February 1984, the calculus of power had shifted in Iraq's favor. Although the constellation of forces arrayed against the Tehran-Damascus axis succeeded in checking its power by 1985, the foundations and mechanics of the alliance were firmly in place. Both partners provided invaluable support to one another in two consecutive crises: Syria assisted Iran in stemming the Iraqi invasion of 1980, enabling its ally to turn the tables on the invader, and subsequently Iran collaborated with Syria to frustrate Israeli and American designs in Lebanon. Therefore, despite the eclipse of the alliance and the tensions among the two members after mid-1985, the partnership was now firmly in place. Having withstood major challenges and the test of time, contrary to the expectations of many, it had been transformed into one of the more durable features on the political landscape of the Middle East. Overall, the Lebanon War served as a major catalyst in the expansion and intensification of Syrian-Iranian collaboration in the region to prevent the realization of Tel Aviv and Washington's designs.

#### **IRAQI STRATEGY TO WEAKEN THE SYRIAN-IRANIAN AXIS AND THE ORIGINS OF THE LEBANON WAR**

By late May 1982, Iraq was in dire straits. Its gambit to defeat revolutionary Iran and propel itself to the position of the Arab world's undisputed leader had failed miserably. The invasion of Iran in the autumn of 1980 had not only helped the Khomeini regime to consolidate its position, but had also enabled the clerical leadership to mobilize the Iranian masses in order to oust the Iraqis from much of the territory that they had captured in the initial stages of the war. The liberation of the key port city of Khorramshahr by Iranian forces on May 24 marked the culmination of Iran's military effort to dislodge the Iraqis from their last major stronghold on Iranian soil. The Iraqi forces in Iran had been decimated within a period of two months.<sup>2</sup> Saddam Hussein had very little to show for his efforts - his grand design had come to naught, and now he had to brace himself for a possible Iranian invasion of Iraq. Baghdad's position had become even more precarious because of the Syrian-Iranian alliance which had been formalized two months earlier. The closure of the trans-Syrian (IPC) pipeline and Syria's support for the Iranian war effort and Iraqi opposition groups had compounded Iraq's predicament. Baghdad looked for ways to prevent the Syrian-Iranian pincer from crushing it. The failure of the uprising in the Syrian city of Hama by the Iraqi-backed Muslim Brethren (February 1982), and Iran's success in routing the Iraqi army (March-May 1982), prompted Iraq to focus on Lebanon, where the political situation was extremely volatile and ideal for foreign manipulation.

In the period leading up to June 1982, the Likud government of Prime Minister Menachem Begin had begun to make preparations for a massive military operation in Lebanon to expel the PLO, inflict a humiliating defeat on the only remaining major Arab confrontation state, Syria, and create a new political order in Lebanon which would be conducive to establishing strong political links with the Jewish state. However, Tel Aviv needed some sort of internationally-recognized provocation in order to launch the invasion of Lebanon, codenamed Operation Peace in the Galilee. The excuse was furnished on June 3, when an attempt was made on the life of the Israeli ambassador to Britain, Shlomo Argov. Ironically, the attempt was carried out by agents of the Iraqi-backed Abu Nidal organization, uncompromising foes of Yasser Arafat's PLO. In the past, the Abu Nidal organization had primarily focused its efforts on eliminating high-ranking PLO officials. Therefore, the attempt on Israel's top representative in London was a major departure from their standard operational norms. In reality, Iraqi intelligence masterminded the attack in order to provoke an Israeli military response in Lebanon. Baghdad was well aware of the Israeli plan to crush the PLO in the south. The Iraqis calculated that a major Israeli military incursion into Lebanon would be to the detriment of the Syrians, regardless of the course of action they adopted. From the Iraqi perspective, if Assad took up the gauntlet by challenging the Israelis militarily, his forces would be annihilated, and even if he did not confront the Israeli forces, he would lose face and credibility at home and throughout the Arab world. For Saddam Hussein either scenario would be a source of great satisfaction. It also provided a way to settle the score with Menachem Begin for having ordered the bombing of the Osiraq reactor, just a year earlier.<sup>3</sup>

#### **THE REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT AND ISRAELI PERCEPTIONS**

According to the view of some scholars, the Israeli government's decision to invade Lebanon was partially based on the new realities in the region and the Reagan administration's foreign policy agenda (specifically checking Soviet power and outmaneuvering it in the Middle East). As Defense Minister Ariel Sharon saw the situation, the toppling of the Pahlavi throne in Iran represented a major loss for both Israel and the United States. However, the absence of an American foothold in Iran meant that Israel's strategic value had increased significantly in the eyes of US policymakers. In the aftermath of the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Washington hastily sought to create some sort of new security framework in the region and hold the Soviets at bay. However, the new US administration had few options, since it was highly doubtful that countries such as Saudi Arabia could effectively fill the vacuum left by the Shah or would demonstrate a willingness to cooperate with Israel on regional security matters. Sharon apparently believed that in the final analysis, despite some reservations, Washington would not object to an invasion of Lebanon, which would deal a severe blow to the Soviet-backed PLO and Syria and concomitantly lead to the installation of a pro-Western Maronite regime in Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> Such a move would not jeopardize the Camp David Accords since the Israelis had completed their withdrawal from the Sinai in April 1982, and their southern flank was now secure.

An additional argument which has been put forth to underscore the interrelationship between

the Lebanon War and the Gulf War is that even the timing of the Israeli invasion was influenced by events in the Persian Gulf. The Israelis calculated that the fact that their invasion coincided with the series of defeats suffered by the Iraqis in the Gulf and the imminent Iranian invasion of Iraq would deflect a great deal of attention in Washington and Arab capitals from the Israeli operation.<sup>5</sup>

#### **SYRIAN-IRANIAN CONSULTATIONS ON THE LEBANON AND GULF WARS**

On June 7, 1982, a day after the commencement of Operation Peace in the Galilee, a high-ranking Iranian military delegation headed by Defense Minister Colonel Salimi, Army Commander Colonel Seyyed-Shirazi and Revolutionary Guards Commander Mohsen Reza'i arrived in Damascus to offer assistance against the Israeli assault in southern Lebanon. Upon arrival, the delegation held talks with Hafez Assad and delivered a message from Iranian President Ali Khamene'i. The Iranian leadership expressed its readiness to dispatch forces to repel the Israeli invaders and assist in the struggle against "Zionism, the battle to liberate the occupied territories, and the occupation of southern Lebanon."<sup>6</sup> Apparently, an agreement was reached to have Iranian troops sent to Lebanon to participate in the fighting against the Israelis.<sup>7</sup> Two days later, at a news conference in New York, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati stated that "we consider this matter one of our foremost duties. It is part of the strategic aims of the Islamic Republic to fight against the Zionist regime. At present, the Defense Minister, the Ground Forces Commander and the revolutionary Guards Corps Commander...are in Syria to assess the amount of assistance required and the mode of its dispatch. In this matter we shall not hesitate. If our brothers in Syria and Lebanon request it, we shall enter the war."<sup>8</sup>

On June 11, Iraq announced a unilateral ceasefire and indicated it was prepared to withdraw its forces to the international boundaries within a two-week period. Concomitantly, after the return of the Iranian military delegation from Syria, a meeting of the Supreme Defense Council (SDC) was convened to discuss the Iraqi proposal and the situation in Lebanon. As a subsequent outcome of the deliberations within the Iranian political and military leadership, Tehran responded by demanding free passage for its armoured units through Iraq to assist the Syrians in the melee - as a new condition for terminating the state of hostility between Iran and Iraq.<sup>9</sup> Iranian Prime Minister Mir Hossein Musavi described this stipulation in light of the new circumstances in the Arab-Israeli conflict as "one of the prime rights of an Islamic country."<sup>10</sup>

Iraq's riposte, which followed almost immediately, accepted the new Iranian demand and expressed its readiness to discuss transit arrangements for the Iranian forces as soon as Tehran agreed to a ceasefire, thereby ending the state of hostility between the two countries.<sup>11</sup> Curiously, Iran did not respond to the Iraqi proposal in any way during the next several days. All indications seem to point that there was a fundamental difference of opinion within the regime about what course of action to pursue next: whether to accept the Iraqi ceasefire proposal, send an expeditionary force via Iraq to Lebanon and mend fences with Baghdad, or on the other hand to continue the Gulf War by launching an invasion of Iraq, thus relegating the Syrian-Israeli conflict in Lebanon to a secondary position (perhaps only sending a token force as a symbolic gesture of

solidarity). Various accounts suggest that Ayatollah Khomeini and Speaker of Parliament Rafsanjani were in favor of taking the war into Iraq, while President Ali Khamene'i, Prime Minister Musavi and the top brass of the Iranian military were against prolonging the conflict with Iraq. The latter group argued that the emphasis from then on should be on rebuilding the country and safeguarding the revolution at home.<sup>12</sup> While the debate brewed in Tehran, Iran airlifted three contingents of volunteers to Damascus. Within a week, at least several hundred volunteers had been flown to Syria.<sup>13</sup> By all accounts, it was unclear exactly how many Iranians transited through Syria for Lebanon. Most reports indicated several thousand in three or four contingents. Damascus only acknowledged the presence of 400, while the Israelis and some foreign diplomats in the Syrian capital claimed that the number was as high as 3,000.<sup>14</sup> In a speech to a group of local representatives from Tabriz, Rafsanjani boasted:

"Since the day our forces arrived in Syria, the situation has changed. That is, the name of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its youth have such a reputation that according to Syrian and Lebanese assertions, the value of the few planeloads of Iranian combatants is far more than if 10 divisions had come from the Arab countries."<sup>15</sup>

In addition to dispatching fighters, Iran's Red Crescent Society shipped substantial amounts of medical supplies and field hospitals.<sup>16</sup> While popular sentiment and domestic pressure grew for a more active Iranian role in the Lebanon War, the debate over the continuation of the Gulf War and the scope of Iranian participation against the Israelis remained unresolved within the Islamic regime.<sup>17</sup> On June 17, a senior Iranian political-military delegation headed by Foreign Minister Velayati and Defense Minister Salimi arrived in Damascus to explore various avenues of cooperation between the two allies in Lebanon. Discussions were held with Syrian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas and the Head of the Political Directorate of the Syrian Armed Forces, Major-General Hassan al-Turkumani.<sup>18</sup> The Iranian delegation put forth proposals to assist the Syrian forces and the Amal movement in the Lebanese theater of operations.<sup>19</sup> The Iranians apparently offered to send some 40,000 regular troops with heavy armor and another 10,000 lightly-equipped Revolutionary Guards and volunteers to fight in Lebanon under Syrian command. A similar proposal had been put forth by the Iranian military a week earlier, but on both occasions Hafez Assad flatly rejected them. It seems that officials in Damascus had been somewhat irked when Tehran initially criticized them for accepting the June 11 ceasefire.<sup>20</sup> However, this does not explain why Assad turned down a generous Iranian offer at a time when the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) had resumed the advance north towards Beirut and were engaging Syrian forces in the process. The answer lies in how the battle unfolded in the first week of the Lebanon War, the prospects for an Iranian invasion of Iraq and Assad's interpretation of these two factors.

## **SYRIAN PERCEPTIONS OF DEVELOPMENTS IN THE LEBANON AND GULF CONFLICTS**

Although Damascus had anticipated an Israeli military incursion into Lebanon in the period leading up to June 6, it had underestimated the scope and scale of the IDF attack. Even until the third day of the invasion, the Syrians still believed that the primary Israeli objective was only to destroy the PLO's bases and infrastructure in south Lebanon. They simply assumed that the IDF thrust would not go beyond the south. However, by June 8, it had become painfully clear that the Israeli scheme was much more ambitious than previously thought. During the next three days, the Syrian forces in Lebanon engaged the IDF in what turned out to be the bloodiest fighting since the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. Despite the determined resistance and commendable fighting of the Syrian army, the Israelis inflicted heavy losses on their hapless opponents. By June 11, when the Begin government announced a unilateral ceasefire on the Bekaa front, Assad eagerly announced his acceptance since it would provide him with a brief respite to rush more units to the front from Syria and eastern Lebanon to beef up defenses along the central and western sectors of the front along the Beirut-Damascus highway and Shouf mountains. The Israeli forces continued their advance towards Beirut, determined to annihilate any Syrian and Palestinian resistance they encountered. Though facing a much larger, better-equipped force, and lacking aircover, the Syrian troops put up stiff resistance and made the Israelis pay dearly as they advanced towards Beirut in the two weeks that followed. By June 25, the IDF had reached Beirut and laid siege to the city. Although it took the Israelis less than three weeks to reach the Lebanese capital, within the first few days of the invasion, the Syrians had come to the bitter realization that their conventional forces could not conduct a convincing defensive action against the enemy, let alone counterattack and launch offensive operations to roll back the Israelis. In this context one has a better understanding of why the Syrians turned down a generous Iranian offer - at a time when their ally was still in a state of war with Ba'thi Iraq. Damascus knew that the participation of the Iranian forces would probably not be enough to tip the scale in their favor.

Moreover, a major pre-requisite for a significant Iranian involvement in the Lebanese theater was the cessation of hostilities between Iran and Iraq. Such a development would mean loosening the Syrian-Iranian noose around the neck of Saddam Hussein and giving him a new lease on life. From Assad's perspective, this type of scenario was far from desirable since it would translate into coming under pressure not only from the Israelis in the west, who had just decimated a substantial part of the Syrian armed forces, but also from his uncompromising foe to the east, Saddam Hussein. In light of Iran's impressive military victories in the spring of 1982, Assad calculated that even if an Iranian invasion of Iraq would not result in the overthrow of his Ba'thi rival in Baghdad, at the very least the Iraqi military machine would be pinned down by his Iranian allies - preventing Saddam Hussein from focusing on his western flank.

While the Syrians did not look favorably on a large scale Iranian military intervention in Lebanon favourably, it would seem that the Iranian "doves" in the Gulf War debate saw a limited Iranian role in the Lebanon War as a more secure alternative than an invasion of neighboring Iraq. It would provide an outlet for the revolutionary and activist fever of the radical clerics, entail less risks,

allow the army to partially demobilize and enable the regime to begin the reconstruction of the country. However, Assad's refusal to accept Iranian troops and probable insistence on the continuation of efforts to unseat Saddam Hussein undoubtedly weakened the position of the Iranian doves and strengthened the resolve of the hawks, who were riding high on the wave of success and trying to build on the momentum which had started in March.

On June 20, the Iranian military delegation returned to Tehran. That same day, Foreign Minister Velayati announced that Iranian forces already in Lebanon had completed reconnaissance missions in that country and would subsequently engage the Israelis.<sup>21</sup> Concurrently, Saddam Hussein declared the commencement of a unilateral Iraqi withdrawal from Iranian territory, which would be completed in ten days, in order to "eliminate an important pretext being used by the suspect regime in Tehran to continue the war, and to put the regime to a decisive test to disclose the rest of its real intentions."<sup>22</sup> Two days later, on June 22, a meeting of the Iranian SDC was convened to discuss the course of action in the two wars. Afterwards, President Khamene'i stated that the leadership had decided that a sizeable military force would not be sent to Lebanon until the war with Iraq was successfully terminated. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Command issued a statement on the exact same day declaring that it was "a binding duty to continue the war until the complete downfall of the Ba'thi-Zionist regime in Baghdad."<sup>23</sup> In the end, Ayatollah Khomeini had overruled the more cautious members of the regime. These included not only President Khamene'i, Prime Minister Musavi and Foreign Minister Velayati, but also high-ranking military figures such as Defense Minister Salimi, Armed Forces Chief General Ghassem Ali Zahir-Nejhad and Army Commander Colonel Seyyed Shirazi. The decision to cross into Iraq was also unpopular with the officer corps and conscripts, who had hoped for early demobilization after the liberation of Khorramshahr.<sup>24</sup>

Overall, the proponents of launching an invasion seem to have won out for several reasons. Firstly, the string of impressive victories over the Iraqis between March and May had exceeded the most optimistic predictions of the Iranian High Command. The results boosted expectations about the efficacy of any future offensive - even if it meant invading Iraqi territory. Khomeini and his supporters smelled blood, believing that one more decisive battle in Iraq would prove Saddam Hussein's undoing. Secondly, on the ideological level, since victory seemed within grasp, the prospect of establishing an Islamic regime in Baghdad was quite attractive. Thirdly, Khomeini's personal animosity towards the Iraqi leader must have figured to some degree in his final decision.<sup>25</sup> Fourthly, from an ethical standpoint, the continuation of hostilities made sense, because the aggressor had not been punished. The war had assumed a moral dimension, portrayed as a "just war" in order to secure peace in the future. Taking into account the recently consolidated Syrian-Iranian alliance, which now had an economic stranglehold over Iraq, and Assad's decision to refuse major Iranian participation in the Lebanon war, the resumption of offensive operations against the Iraqis seemed to be the logical plan of action - both for pragmatic and ideological purposes. Syria's refusal to allow Iran to carry out an Islamic crusade against the Israelis in Lebanon meant that only through the continuation of the Gulf War would Iran have a means and outlet to export its revolution



and channel its missionary zeal. Despite reports and official statements made by Syrian officials that they would reconsider their relationship with Iran if Arab Iraq was invaded, such declarations seem highly suspect. In all likelihood, they were hollow words to allay the Arab fears that Damascus was supporting a non-Arab country's intention to invade another Arab state.

### **THE IRANIAN INVASION OF IRAQ AND SYRIAN REGIONAL DIPLOMACY**

The available evidence clearly indicates that there was a strong difference of opinion within the Iranian leadership about the wisdom of continuing the Gulf War. Furthermore, one can only speculate about the nature of the deliberations between Syria and Iran between June 7 and 17, and the critical meeting of the SDC on June 22. If Damascus had consented to a large-scale Iranian intervention in the Lebanon War, the position of the "doves" in the Gulf War debate definitely would have been strengthened, and the course of history in the region might have been totally altered. Moreover, considering Hafez Assad's cool-headedness and meticulous approach to formulating and implementing policy even in times of crisis, he must have had strong reservations about the usefulness of Iranian participation in the Lebanon War and known that denying Tehran a prominent role in Lebanon would bolster the position of the Iranian hardliners who advocated the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the Iraq Ba'ath. It is interesting to note that the majority of statements made by Iranian officials between June 6 and 22 about Tehran's posture towards Iraq and Israel were quite vague. Immediately following the crucial SDC meeting on June 22, Iranian policymakers made numerous declarations explicitly stating and articulating their future policy in the Gulf and Lebanon.

On June 29, Saddam Hussein announced that all Iraqi forces had been withdrawn from Iranian soil and had taken up defensive positions in Iraq. (In reality, they still occupied at least 550 square miles of Iranian territory in certain areas in order to prevent possible Iranian thrusts towards Baghdad and southern Iraq).<sup>26</sup> On the same day, the Iranian foreign ministry issued a statement explaining that Iran would "continue its honourable war against Saddam's regime... until the sources of fire of the Iraqi forces are silenced and an honorable peace is secured."<sup>27</sup> Following a meeting with Iranian Speaker of Parliament Rafsanjani, the Soviet chargé d'affaires and the head of the Libyan People's Bureau (on the exact same day), the Syrian ambassador in Tehran stated that "The President of Syria agrees with the recent remarks by the Imam [Khomeini] about the Iran-Iraq war, namely that the problem with Iraq should be sorted out first and then it will be the turn of the Zionist regime..."<sup>28</sup>

Preparations were already underway to launch a major offensive in southern Iraq. On July 6, just one week before the first major operation in Iraq, Defense Minister Colonel Mohammad Salimi declared that "a push into Iraqi territory had become inevitable."<sup>29</sup> In light of the events in Lebanon, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ahmad Azizi justified the decision by positing that the only way for Iranian forces to reach Lebanon and fight the Israelis was to cross Iraqi territory once the enemy had been defeated - thereby ensuring the security of Iran against any possible future aggression.<sup>30</sup> Echoing a view similar to that held by the Syrians, Azizi also severely criticized Soviet "silence" and inaction towards the crisis in Lebanon.<sup>31</sup>

As Iran made preparations to take the offensive once again, there was a flurry of diplomatic activity in the pro-Iraqi camp to cement ties between Baghdad, Cairo and Amman. On July 5, Iraqi Justice Minister Mundhir Ibrahim al-Shawi paid a visit to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo. During their talks, the Iraqi envoy officially extended an invitation to the Egyptian leader to attend the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit, which was scheduled to be held in Baghdad between September 6 and 10.<sup>32</sup> Jordan's King Hussein flew to Baghdad a few days later to coordinate activities and improve avenues of cooperation with the Iraqis.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, on July 11, in a very telling interview with the Islamic Republican Party daily, *Jomhuri Islami*, Prime Minister Musavi clarified the official government position with regard to the Gulf War by enunciating that:

"we have a right to take any measure deemed necessary to protect our country, create real security and obtain reparations for war damages. It is a religious obligation for us to fight against injustice and aggression. If the Islamic Republic were to sue for peace at a time when none of our conditions are fulfilled, [it] would be like strangling the revolution with our own hands."<sup>34</sup>

Two days later, on July 13, Iran launched its first major offensive into Iraqi territory. The operation, codenamed "Ramadan al-Mubarak" (Blessed Ramadan), was executed in three phases and lasted until August 3. The primary objective was to breach the Iraqi defenses east of Basra, seize the key port city and count on a spontaneous Shi'ite uprising in the south against the Ba'thi government. Despite inflicting heavy losses on the Iraqis and occupying some 180 square miles in the southern sector, the offensive proved to be a disaster.<sup>35</sup> The Iranians failed to overwhelm the Iraqis, who stood their ground on the outskirts of Basra and repulsed the invaders. In addition to suffering substantial losses, the clerical establishment in Tehran was greatly disappointed by the fact that there was no Shi'ite rebellion.<sup>36</sup>

When the offensive began in mid-July, Baghdad also reported border skirmishes between Iraqi and Syrian ground forces and renewed Syrian air force activity along their common frontier.<sup>37</sup> The failure of Operation Ramadan came as an immense disappointment to officials both in Tehran and Damascus. It prompted them to redouble their efforts to destabilize the Iraqi regime internally. In order to orchestrate their joint strategy, the Chief of Syrian Air Force Intelligence, General Mohammed al-Khouli, and two high-ranking military intelligence officers were dispatched to Tehran to coordinate their activities with Iranian officials and representatives of the Iraqi Al-Dawa party. Al-Khouli's two companions remained in Iran in order to facilitate planning and cooperation with their Iranian counterparts and the Iraqi opposition.<sup>38</sup> This led to the intensification of sabotage and subversion in Iraq and abroad. In early August the Iraqi Ministry of Planning in Baghdad was carbombed, while the Iraqi embassy in Paris was also attacked.<sup>39</sup> A primary goal of this joint Syrian-Iranian effort was to create an unsafe atmosphere in Baghdad in order to prevent the convening of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit.<sup>40</sup>

Both regionally and internationally, Operation Ramadan was a major political watershed since it transformed the whole nature of the conflict and how it was perceived by various actors. It

demonstrated that the Islamic Republic was bent on exporting its revolution, toppling the Iraqi Ba'th in the process and radically altering the political map of the Middle East. It forced the moderate Arab states, France and the United States to throw their weight behind Iraq even more, and forced the Soviet Union to critically reassess its pro-Iranian stance and realign itself in order to prop up Saddam Hussein. On the domestic level, Iran's failure to capture Basra clearly demonstrated the resilience of the Iraqi armed forces in rising to the occasion to defend their homeland, rallied popular support around the Ba'th and illustrated that the Iraqi Shi'ites were unwilling to collaborate with their Persian co-religionists in the conflict.<sup>41</sup>

The fall of Khorramshahr had initially caused the Gulf Arabs and Egyptians to become somewhat reluctant to aid Iraq and be outspoken in their support for their Arab brethren. However, the successful Iraqi defense of Basra changed the situation.<sup>42</sup> In an interview with the London-based daily *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* in Riyadh, immediately following the Iranian defeat in Phase I of Operation Ramadan, Egyptian Deputy Minister and Foreign Minister Kamal Hasan Ali said that Cairo would continue to provide military hardware and supplies to Iraq. He went on to criticize Syria's conduct in the Lebanon and Gulf conflicts.<sup>43</sup> As early as mid-July, Iraq's staunchest ally, King Hussein of Jordan, referring to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Iranian invasion of Iraq, called for an emergency Arab summit meeting to discuss "the fateful challenges facing the Arab nation." He lashed out at Iran, accusing it of complicity with Israel. He denounced Iran's Operation Ramadan, claiming that it gave Israel a *carte blanche* to do as it wished in Lebanon.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, Jordan and other Arab states concerned about Iran's intransigence were presented with a golden opportunity to voice their concerns and urge greater inter-Arab cooperation and solidarity at the Fez II summit in September. In the period leading up to the summit meeting there was some degree of diplomatic activity among members of the anti-Iraq bloc. A few days prior to the summit, Hafez Assad received Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ahmad Azizi and discussed regional developments and bilateral ties. Concurrently, Algerian Foreign Minister Dr. Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi arrived in Tehran and held talks with Iranian officials.<sup>45</sup> The purpose of these meetings seems to have been to harmonize positions on regional issues. Before discussing Syria's participation at the Fez conference and Syrian-Iranian cooperation in the closing months of 1982, it is necessary to look at Syrian policy in Lebanon during the summer.

#### **SYRIA'S CONFRONTATION WITH ISRAEL AND IRAN'S LEBANON POLICY**

As mentioned earlier, although Damascus had observed the Israeli military build-up along the Lebanese border in the two months preceding the invasion, it was clearly surprised by the scale and scope of the attack. Only on June 8, the third day of Operation Peace in the Galilee, did the Syrians finally decide to make a stand and fight against an advancing Israeli armoured spearhead at the strategically-located crossroad town of Jezzine (dominating the axes leading to the Shouf Mountains, the Bekaa Valley, Sidon and southern Lebanon).<sup>46</sup> In the three days that followed, there was intense fighting between the Israeli and Syrian forces along the three major axes of the Israeli thrust north, and in the air. By June 11, when Menachem Begin finally accepted an American ceasefire proposal,

and subsequently announced a unilateral cessation to hostilities, the Syrian forces in Lebanon had suffered an enormous blow. Within a 72-hour period, the IDF had knocked out some 400 Syrian tanks, 90 combat aircraft, 100 artillery/missile batteries and 70 armoured vehicles, and inflicted about 1,900 casualties.<sup>47</sup> Assad knew that both qualitatively and quantitatively he was outmatched. Despite incurring heavy losses, the Syrians had not been routed. The bulk of their forces remained intact.<sup>48</sup> Assad's decision to engage the Israelis had been a carefully calibrated response, to avoid the two possible scenarios that Saddam Hussein had hoped would materialize. Avoidance of a confrontation with the invading army would have enabled him to save most of the Syrian forces in Lebanon, but would undoubtedly have brought an end to Syrian dominance over the country and greatly diminished Assad's prestige and influence both at home and throughout the Arab world. On the other hand, if he had committed the majority of his forces to battle and waged a total war against the Israelis (as the Iranian clerics had advocated), the Syrian army would have been annihilated and would have permanently lost its foothold in Lebanon.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the latter was not considered to be a viable option since total war could have led to an Israeli invasion of Syria through the Bekaa Valley and the Golan Heights, thus resulting in the loss of Syrian territory and the collapse of the Syrian Ba'th regime itself. Assad's Iranian allies had initially advocated a total war against Israel with Iranian participation.<sup>50</sup> Assad strenuously objected to such suggestions and instead pursued an alternate course of action to preserve Syrian interests in Lebanon as much as possible, and deliver limited blows to the Israelis in the process.

The June 11 ceasefire gave Assad some breathing space to regroup and reinforce his troops. Immediately, the elite Third Armored Division, which was equipped with advanced Soviet-made T-72 tanks, was moved into Lebanon and took up defensive positions in the Bekaa. Once the deployment was complete, the IDF never again attempted to make further advances along its eastern front. Furthermore, Damascus' decision to bring crack commando battalions into the fray in the early days of the invasion stymied Israeli efforts to reach the Shouf and the Beirut-Damascus highway by the June 11 ceasefire. Overall, the IDF's inability to achieve its objectives rapidly and the unexpectedly stiff resistance of the Syrian defenders persuaded Israeli military planners to shift their forces away from the east and concentrate on pushing towards Beirut and the Beirut-Damascus highway along the western and central axes.<sup>51</sup> Between June 12 and 25, the IDF resumed its advance towards Beirut and the international highway (on the pretext that the Palestinians and Syrians had violated the ceasefire) and eventually succeeded in gaining control of the highway and laying siege to the Lebanese capital. According to some reports, some Iranian soldiers were fighting alongside Palestinian units in West Beirut.<sup>52</sup> There were claims by Tel Aviv that several hundred were also involved in clashes with the IDF in the Syrian-held Alei (Alayh) district, southeast of Beirut in the central sector.<sup>53</sup>

On June 25, the Israeli government again announced a unilateral ceasefire due to pressure from the Reagan administration and the fact that Tel Aviv had attained its operational objectives by reaching Beirut. The primary goal now was to eliminate the PLO infrastructure in Beirut and facilitate the establishment of a Maronite government in Lebanon (freed from the shackles of Syrian and

Palestinian dominance) which would be willing to sign a peace treaty with the Jewish state.<sup>54</sup> The IDF subsequently commenced a siege and simultaneous bombardment of the city to achieve the desired outcome. Trapped within West Beirut were some 14,000 Palestinian fighters, Syrian troops and Shi'ite Amal militiamen. The Syrian forces were primarily composed of the 85th Infantry Brigade, together with the Palestine Liberation Army's Hittin and Qadisiyah brigades. Ayatollah Khomeini spoke out against the "deadly silence" in the Arab world, and the failure of many Arab states to send troops to stem the Israeli invasion. He called on them to join the ranks of Syria, Iran and the PLO to defend the dignity of Islam in the face of the "Zionist" onslaught.<sup>55</sup>

Despite massive artillery and aerial bombardment by the Israelis, which lasted until mid-August, the defenders put up an unexpectedly determined resistance. With a ceasefire in effect on all other fronts, Damascus took advantage of this period to rebuild and upgrade its armed forces with the assistance of the Soviet Union. In addition, Assad was content to see the IDF tied down in a brutal campaign of trying to force the defenders into submission by destroying parts of the city and killing civilians - in the process bringing international condemnation of its actions.<sup>56</sup> Finally, in mid-August, US envoy Philip Habib hammered out an agreement between the two sides for the withdrawal of the Palestinians and Syrians from Beirut under the supervision of a multinational force comprised of Western troops. The evacuation began on August 21, and was complete by the end of the month. While most of the Palestinians departed for other Arab countries by sea, the six thousand remaining Syrian and PLA soldiers withdrew via the Beirut-Damascus highway to the Bekaa and Syria.<sup>57</sup>

By the beginning of September, Assad's fortunes were at a low point; within a period of three months his power and influence had plunged to new depths. A significant portion of the Syrian forces in Lebanon had been destroyed - clearly demonstrating the inferiority of its conventional capabilities, large parts of the country had been lost to the enemy, and Syria's prestige and image had been severely tarnished. To make matters worse, on August 23, the pro-Israeli Phalange party leader Bashir Gemayel was elected as the new Lebanese President. Furthermore, to add insult to injury, US President Ronald Reagan enunciated the Reagan Plan, which proposed the creation of a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation that included the West Bank and Gaza Strip. No mention was made of Syria or the Golan Heights. Having been rendered militarily impotent by the Israelis, faced with a political fait accompli in Lebanon, and isolated in the Arab world, Assad drew up a strategy to recoup his regional power and standing. The first step was to attend the Fez II summit in early September.

#### **THE FEZ II SUMMIT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Syria had boycotted the Amman summit in November 1980 and only sent a low-level delegation to the Fez I summit the following year. However, due to its weak and vulnerable position after the initial phase of the Lebanon War, Syria felt obliged to attend Fez II in order to avoid the risk of even greater criticism and isolation in the Arab world.<sup>58</sup> The highlight of the summit was a four-hour meeting on September 8, attended by Hafez Assad and

Saddam Hussein at the behest of King Hussein, King Fahd, King Hassan of Morocco and the Emir of Kuwait, all of whom were present at the meeting. It resulted in Assad's acceptance of a strongly-worded pro-Iraq resolution on the Gulf War and agreement to meet again with the Iraqi leader (in the presence of the Saudi monarch) within two months.<sup>59</sup> Syria's acceptance of the resolution reflected its weak and awkward position due to its painful predicament in Lebanon and "deviant" behavior in supporting Persian Iran.<sup>60</sup> Although both the state-controlled Syrian and Iranian media omitted all references to this particular section of the final statement, the Iranian foreign ministry nonetheless condemned the Arab summit, since it claimed that the final statement recognized the Jewish state.<sup>61</sup>

Immediately after the summit, Hafez Assad dispatched his close aide and political confidant, Information Minister Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad, and Deputy Foreign Minister Nasir Qaddur to Tehran to reassure the Iranian leadership of Damascus' commitment to the alliance and continued support for Iran's "firm and principled stand." They met with President Khamene'i, Speaker of Parliament Rafsanjani and other officials over a two-day period. Ahmad apparently defended Assad's decision to meet with Saddam Hussein by describing the meeting as mere protocol and politically insignificant.<sup>62</sup> In an official statement, before his departure from Iran, he declared:

"We consider the Iranian revolution the most important event in the second half of the 20th century. We also consider it a positive development in this age. This revolution has turned the Iranian people and capabilities from an alliance with Israel and enemies into an alliance with the Arabs, struggling with us against Zionism and US imperialism for the sake of liberating holy Jerusalem."<sup>63</sup>

The overall tone of his statement seemed somewhat apologetic. He admitted that Iran's denunciation of the Fez resolution was justified and said that the mutual animosity between Baghdad and Damascus left no room for dialogue or compromise until one of the two Ba'thi regimes had been overthrown.<sup>64</sup>

In general, Syria's participation and conduct in the Fez summit demonstrated the degree to which its political clout and room for maneuver had decreased since the defeat in Lebanon. However, at the very least it needed to play an active role in Arab political fora to prevent a further slide into isolation - and perhaps banishment from the Arab fold. Its military inferiority and political isolation in the Arab world meant that it now needed revolutionary Iran more than ever in order to undo Tel Aviv's achievements in Lebanon. Political exigencies in the region necessitated even closer cooperation with the Islamic Republic, now that its Persian ally on the ascendant had taken the war into Iraqi territory. Syria's collaboration with Iran was no longer for the purpose of enabling the latter to stave off defeat in the Gulf war, but to maintain pressure on Ba'thi Iraq and utilize Iranian support and influence in Lebanon to thwart Tel Aviv's ambitions.

#### **SYRIA'S "SWORD AND SHIELD" STRATEGY IN LEBANON**

By September 1982, Assad was facing numerous obstacles which apparently seemed insurmountable. Having tasted bitter defeat in his military confrontation with Israel, waging a conventional war was no longer a viable option. At the same time, he was now confronted with a

sizeable Israeli military presence in Lebanon, a new government in Beirut which did not share his goals and concerns and an American administration which perceived him as a Soviet puppet and was vehemently opposed to Syrian policy in the region in every respect. Despite the complexities of the situation, Assad devised a simple two-pronged strategy which would seek to minimize the risk of further escalation or a direct military confrontation with Israel and the United States, and concomitantly roll back the IDF. Assad's policy consisted of two components (one for offensive purposes and the other for defensive aims), hereafter referred to as the "Sword and Shield" strategy, which was very much dependent on the goodwill and assistance of Syria's two primary allies - Iran and the Soviet Union.

The political linchpin of the "sword and shield" strategy to buttress Syria's position vis-à-vis the Bashir Gemayel regime, Israel and the United States was Syria's special relationship with its superpower patron, the Soviet Union, and its main regional partner, Iran. From September 1982, the Syrians embarked on a policy to use Iran's influence over the Lebanese Shi'ite community and collaborate with their two Shi'ite allies to wage a campaign of terrorism, subversion and guerilla attacks against their mutual opponents. The use of unconventional warfare as an offensive instrument served as the "sword" in Syrian strategy. Damascus took advantage of its role as Moscow's only major ally in the region to demand Soviet-made conventional arms to replenish its losses from the war and achieve "strategic parity" with Tel Aviv over the long term. Thus, the Soviet re-supply effort for the modernization and expansion of the Syrian armed forces was aimed at building a conventional deterrent, which would act as the "shield" in the overall scheme. In addition to putting their ties with Iran and the Soviet Union to good use, the Syrians also mobilized other political and sectarian groupings within Lebanon to wage war against the Israeli forces. In the words of Patrick Seale:

"His [Asad's] first priorities were to encourage guerilla harassment of Israel in Lebanon, while racing to rebuild Syria's own armed strength. He was not ready for an immediate confrontation. In preparing to subvert Israel's designs, he had to lie low and lull his opponents into believing he was finished."<sup>65</sup>

The first significant incident occurred on September 14, when a tremendous blast ripped through the headquarters of the Phalange Party, killing President Bashir Gemayel and more than thirty of his associates. Subsequent events revealed that the explosive device had been planted in the building by a clandestine member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party who had been activated by Syrian intelligence. The assassination came as an immense shock to the Israeli leadership, who had pinned much hope on establishing a close working relationship with the new Lebanese President. With one stroke, one of the main pillars of the Pax Hebraica, which Menachem Begin had envisioned, was dismantled. Although not known for possessing pro-Israeli credentials, Bashir Gemayel's brother, Amin, who was elected a week later, was the best the Israelis could hope for under the circumstances. By now, though, the process of gradually denying the Israelis the fruits of their initial military victory had been set into motion. Syria's patient planning and close collaboration with Iran and the Lebanese Shi'ites, coupled with egregious acts committed by Israel and its allies,

encouraged the Shi'ites to resist the imposition of an Israeli-Maronite diktat.

### **The Syrian-Iranian Axis and the Lebanese Shi'ite Community**

Ironically, in the initial phase of Operation Peace in the Galilee, the majority of Lebanese Shi'ites were relieved by the expulsion of the Palestinians from the south, and indeed welcomed the Israelis as liberators. Palestinian heavy-handedness and arrogance throughout the years had alienated many of their Shi'ite "Arab brethren," who by 1982 had lost sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians.<sup>66</sup> In fact, in the early days of the invasion the mainstream Shi'ite Amal movement denounced the Israeli attack, but did not call for a military confrontation or a popular uprising against the IDF.<sup>67</sup> As a consequence of the destruction of the PLO's infrastructure in the south and the evacuation of its forces from Beirut in August 1982, the Shi'ite militias were able to strengthen their presence in West Beirut and other parts of the country. Amal in particular was able to maintain a powerful and disciplined force.<sup>68</sup> Two major developments in this period, however, turned the Shi'ite community against the IDF and the Gemayel government. Firstly, once it became clear that the Israelis intended on staying indefinitely, coupled with their brutal conduct in areas that they occupied (which were predominantly Shi'ite), local resistance slowly began to grow with Syrian and Iranian encouragement.<sup>69</sup> Secondly, following the Israeli withdrawal from Beirut (which had been a precondition for the return of the Multinational Force) in late September, the American-supported Lebanese Army entered West Beirut to reassert control over the remainder of the city. However, its mistreatment of the Shi'ite inhabitants led to ferocious clashes with Shi'ite militiamen.<sup>70</sup> Guerrilla activity against the IDF began to increase in south Lebanon, the most notable instance being the destruction of the IDF staff headquarters in the southern city of Tyre on November 11, when sixty-seven Israelis were killed.

By now, there was a clear convergence of interest between Damascus and Tehran to mobilize the Lebanese Shi'ite community against their pro-American Maronite overlords in Beirut and their Israeli occupiers. Syria's relationship with Iran began to pay dividends, since the need to "unsheathe the Lebanese Shi'ite sword" overlapped with Tehran's mission to export the Islamic revolution and deal a decisive blow to "Zionism and American imperialism."<sup>71</sup> By this juncture, there were reported to have been some 2,000 Iranian Revolutionary Guards stationed in the city of Ba'albek in the Syrian-held Bekaa valley region. They made their presence felt when, on November 22, a contingent of 300 men took over the town hall in Ba'albek and attacked the Lebanese army garrison in the town.<sup>72</sup> Lebanese Foreign Minister Elie Salem summoned the Iranian ambassador, Hojjatolislam Musa Fakhri-Rouhani, and lodged an official protest, demanding an immediate Iranian pull-out from the area and threatening to sever diplomatic ties.<sup>73</sup> The Iranian ambassador flatly denied any Iranian involvement, and Iranian President Khamene'i subsequently insisted that the Revolutionary Guards would remain in Lebanon.<sup>74</sup> By now, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards had forged close links with radical Shi'ite groups in the area, particularly with Hussein Musawi's Islamic Amal organization. Musawi, a Lebanese of Iranian descent, had previously been the military commander of the parent Amal movement.<sup>75</sup> In the aftermath of the Israeli invasion, he broke away



and formed his own group in the Bekaa with Syrian and Iranian support. He differed with Amal leader Nabih Beri over the ideological orientation of the movement. While Beri espoused the traditional Shi'ite position of loyalty to the Lebanese state and religious plurality within the framework of the existing political system, Musawi saw the Lebanese political structure and identity as fundamentally flawed and artificial. Instead, he advocated the mass mobilization of the Shi'ites towards the fulfillment of an Islamic revolution and the emulation of the Iranian theocratic state model.<sup>76</sup>

Contrary to the wishes of the Gemayel government, Tehran eventually bolstered its presence by dispatching more Revolutionary Guards to the Bekaa via Syria. They subsequently set up a radio station and intensified their efforts to proselytize and indoctrinate Lebanese Shi'ites. None of this could have taken place without, at the very least, the tacit cooperation of Damascus.<sup>77</sup> The Iranians and Islamic Amal also succeeded in spreading their influence to the Shi'ite neighborhoods of West Beirut.<sup>78</sup>

As Tehran sought to expand its foothold in Lebanon with the assistance of the Syrians and Shi'ite radicals, Damascus concomitantly mobilized many of the other political parties that could prove to be beneficial in the struggle against Begin's grand strategy. These consisted of some of the key players in Lebanese politics, such as the Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), the Lebanese Bath Party, the Lebanese Communist Party and the various other Shi'ite groups.<sup>79</sup> While the result of these efforts was not immediately noticeable, they would have an enormous impact on the course of the political struggle in Lebanon the following year.

#### **SYRIAN-IRANIAN COOPERATION AND THE PERSIAN GULF WAR**

Although the Syrians had cautioned their Iranian allies that they would not condone an Iranian invasion of Iraq and would seriously reconsider their ties with Tehran, Syrian policy did not change in the aftermath of Operation Ramadan. In fact, Syria continued to send Soviet-made weapons to Iran.<sup>80</sup>

In the aftermath of Fez II, which brought strong Arab condemnation of Iran, the clerical regime in Tehran continued to nurture its friendship with Damascus, despite some disappointment with Assad's impotence and lackluster performance at the Arab summit.<sup>81</sup> From the Iranian perspective, with victory within grasp and Iraq's incessant attempts to portray the war as a historical continuation of the Arab-Persian conflict, it was imperative to maintain cordial ties and a close working relationship with Arab Syria, for both ideological and practical purposes. Moreover, this was also necessitated by the growing cooperation between Iraq and Egypt in military affairs, and the poor state of relations between Iran and many of the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia. Saudi-Iranian relations suffered during the Hajj season, when Iranian pilgrims were involved in clashes with Saudi security forces in the holy city of Mecca. There were mutual recriminations, and bilateral relations deteriorated even further.<sup>82</sup>

After a two-month lull on the warfront, Iran finally resumed the offensive on October 1, when Operation Muslim Ibn Aqil was launched in the central sector (near the town of Mandali), aimed at

advancing towards the Iraqi capital. Again, the Iraqis held their ground and blunted the Iranian assault.<sup>83</sup> During the Iranian offensive, the Sudan, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and North Yemen expressed their solidarity and support for Iraq. Furthermore, a high-level Jordanian delegation headed by King Hussein visited Baghdad in the midst of the hostilities to discuss various avenues of cooperation between the two sides.<sup>84</sup> With Iran determined to prosecute the war to the very bitter end and Israel's ostensible victory in Lebanon, the Amman daily *Al-Dustur*, in an article on October 25 reflecting opinion in official government circles, called for ending Egypt's banishment from the Arab fold since it was detrimental to Arab interests and would only benefit the enemies of the Arab nation.<sup>85</sup>

On November 1, the Iranians undertook their last major offensive operation of the year, in the south. Codenamed "Muharram al-Harram," the main objective of the attack was to cut the Baghdad-Basra highway and establish a bridgehead to serve as a springboard for further offensive operations against Basra. In spite of some success in capturing the Bayat oilfield and destroying an Iraqi armored brigade, the attackers failed to attain their primary goal, advancing only five miles in seven days of heavy fighting.<sup>86</sup>

Meanwhile the war of words between Tehran and Riyadh intensified. For example, in a radio broadcast from Riyadh on November 10, the commentator tried to arouse nationalist and religious sentiments by arguing that:

"The only factor in the continuation of this war is Iran's insistence and stubbornness in continuing the fighting...Today, Iraq stands in firm confrontation with plans that have been made by the enemies of Arabism and Islam who have chosen the Iranian regime to implement them. There is no way to thwart those plans and foil them, except by supporting Iraq financially and militarily in order to destroy the Iranian war machine..."<sup>87</sup>

Iranian ripostes broadcast on Tehran's Arabic service bitterly criticized Saudi Arabia's "unlimited support" for Saddam Hussein, accusing it of being a lackey of the United States in the region.<sup>88</sup> A propaganda campaign was also waged against the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, claiming that since the outbreak of the Gulf War they had rewarded Baghdad with financial aid to the tune of \$45 billion.<sup>89</sup> In an editorial which appeared in the Iranian daily *Ettela'at* on December 1, the GCC was characterized as a military security pact for propping up decadent, repressive regimes, which served as a substitute to CENTO to further Washington's interests.<sup>90</sup>

Tehran's growing isolation from its Arab neighbors in this period required forging closer links with its few remaining Arab allies - namely, Syria and Libya. During a visit by Libyan Secretary for Foreign Liaison Abd al-Ati al-Ubaydi to Tehran in early December, he declared that the "least punishment appropriate for Saddam is his overthrow," and that Libya would assist Iran in the war "in any way necessary."<sup>91</sup>

## **THE DETERIORATION OF SOVIET-IRANIAN RELATIONS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE SYRIAN-IRANIAN ALLIANCE**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, despite an operative Treaty of Friendship with Iraq, the Soviet Union had not favored that country's invasion and occupation of Iranian territory in September 1980.

Consequently, Moscow suspended arms shipments to Iraq soon after the outbreak of the war. The Kremlin also perceived this as a golden opportunity to win over Iran, the key strategic prize in the Persian Gulf area.<sup>92</sup> However, with the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Iran by mid-1982, and the first Iranian offensive against Basra in July, Moscow expressed its displeasure with Iran's continuation of the conflict. The Kremlin's subsequent failure to persuade the Iranian regime to accept a negotiated settlement led to the resumption of Soviet arms deliveries to Iraq.<sup>93</sup> This resulted in a marked deterioration in Soviet-Iranian relations. By the autumn of 1982, Iraq began firing Soviet-built Scud-B and Frog-7 surface-to-surface missiles at Dezful, Ahwaz and other Iranian border cities.<sup>94</sup> Iran's state-controlled media carried scathing criticisms of the Iranian Communist Party (the Tudeh) and Soviet foreign policy.<sup>95</sup>

During the same period, the Soviet vice-consul in Tehran, Vladimir Kuzichkin, defected to British intelligence with documents revealing the extent of Soviet and Tudeh penetration of Iran. The British subsequently provided this information to the Iranian government. The Tehran regime eagerly embarked on a massive crackdown to destroy the Soviet-Tudeh network.<sup>96</sup> By February 1983, the entire leadership and hundreds of members of the Tudeh Party were arrested and charged with spying for the Soviet Union.<sup>97</sup> In April, 18 Soviet diplomats were summarily expelled. By the following month, the Tudeh had been officially banned and the Soviet embassy staff had been reduced by half. In December of the same year, ten top members of the Tudeh were executed, after being tried and charged with infiltrating the armed forces and providing military secrets to the Soviet Union.<sup>98</sup> Within a matter of a few months, the entire Tudeh infrastructure and the painstakingly developed Soviet network were destroyed.<sup>99</sup> Besides the internal crackdown on pro-Soviet elements, the government continued its anti-communist media campaign and started to provide substantial amounts of aid to the Afghan guerrilla movements.

The marked deterioration in Soviet-Iranian relations during this period also affected Syria's ties with both its superpower patron and its Iranian ally. While Assad's dependence on Moscow grew noticeably in the aftermath of the defeat in Lebanon, he was able to strengthen his position vis-à-vis the Kremlin and demand additional military assistance due to the rupture in Soviet-Iranian relations at a time when Soviet-Iraqi ties were just beginning to thaw. Furthermore, the Kremlin could ill afford to ignore the plight of its only major regional ally at a time when Washington was pursuing an activist policy in the Middle East and supporting Israel in order to diminish Soviet power and influence in the area.<sup>100</sup> The breakdown in cooperation between the USSR and the Islamic Republic also increased the value and utility of the Syrian-Iranian axis from Tehran's viewpoint. Iranian enmity towards both superpowers meant that greater emphasis would have to be put on forging even closer ties with regional allies such as Syria. Concomitantly, Damascus' role assumed even greater importance in both Tehran and Moscow since it could serve as an intermediary between the two parties.

The Syrians for their part undertook efforts to prevent any further worsening in Soviet-Iranian relations, partly to avoid being trapped in an awkward position between their two closest friends.<sup>101</sup> Indeed they embarked on a policy to bring about a Soviet-Iranian rapprochement. However, by March 1983, their efforts proved to have fallen short of initial expectations.<sup>102</sup> Syrian-Iranian relations became somewhat strained by Damascus' decision to grant some Tudeh members political asylum in Syria. Furthermore, the revolutionary clerics in Tehran did not look kindly on Moscow's attempts to reconcile existing differences between Syria and Iraq.<sup>103</sup>

#### **THE EMERGENCE OF THE EGYPTIAN-JORDANIAN-IRAQI AXIS AND SYRIA'S REGIONAL DIPLOMACY**

By the end of 1982, there were unmistakable signs that Egypt was gradually making inroads into the Arab world. Major steps were taken towards cementing relations with Jordan and Iraq. On December 9, Egyptian Foreign Minister Boutros Boutros-Ghali visited Amman, bearing a message from Hosni Mubarak for King Hussein.<sup>104</sup> Concomitantly, in a statement published in the Egyptian daily *Al-Ahram* on December 28, Iraqi Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz declared that "the Arab structure could not be straightened without Egypt." He went on to explain that the enemies of the Arab nation had failed in their efforts to isolate Egypt and underscored Baghdad's willingness to restore diplomatic relations with Cairo.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, Aziz announced that he would be prepared to meet high-ranking Egyptian officials in Cairo, Baghdad or anywhere else to discuss the resumption of bilateral relations. This elicited a positive response from the Egyptians. From their perspective, an Egyptian-Iraqi rapprochement was an important stepping stone towards their eventual reintegration into the Arab world.<sup>106</sup>

Indeed, in the latter half of 1982, the continuation of the Gulf conflict and Iran's incessant attempts to penetrate deep into Iraqi territory proved to be the single most important catalyst for Egypt's gradual return to the Arab fold. Besides the growing cooperation between Cairo and Baghdad, and the material assistance given to Iraq, both sides tried to portray their mutual coordination to thwart Iranian ambitions in terms of pan-Arab interests and condemned renegade Arab states such as Syria for stabbing the Arab nation in the back. For example, in his Army Day speech, Saddam Hussein bitterly criticized Syria's "collusion with the [Arab] nation's enemies" and warned that Iran's actions to prolong the war were "not only a plot against Iraq, but against the Arab nation, Arab civilization and the Arabs' entire security and future."<sup>107</sup> In an interview which appeared in the Arab press, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak also denounced Iran's Arab allies - Syria and Libya. He singled out Syria in particular, pointing out that "it is unbecoming of Syria to stand with Iran against Iraq. The Syrians at least should have played the role of mediators."<sup>108</sup> Concurrently, in mid-January, Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah undertook an initiative to bring about a Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement, shuttling between Baghdad and Damascus. His objective was two-fold: to convince Syria to change its stance in the Gulf War to one of benevolent neutrality, thereby reopening the trans-Syrian pipeline and consequently boosting Iraq's position economically and, secondly, denying Iran its most valuable Arab ally - translating into a major psychological and political blow to Tehran.

According to Saudi calculations, delivering such a coup de grace could induce Iran to accept a ceasefire.<sup>109</sup> In the meantime, King Hussein also visited Iraq and other Gulf Arab states in order to rally support for Baghdad's cause, while Syria's foreign minister toured the Gulf sheikhdoms to prevent the emergence of a sizeable Arab bloc to neutralize the Tehran-Damascus axis.<sup>110</sup> During his talks with King Fahd, Khaddam rejected outright an offer from the Saudi monarch to mediate and arrange a meeting between the Syrian and Iraqi heads of state. Moreover, a generous Saudi offer to make a \$2 billion payment in return for the reopening of the trans-Syrian (IPC) pipeline was also turned down.<sup>111</sup>

Instead, to the chagrin of Riyadh, Syria organized a high-level meeting in Damascus in late January, intended to rally some Arab support for Iran's position in the Gulf war.<sup>112</sup> On January 20, Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati and Libyan Justice Minister Muhammad al-Zouai arrived in Damascus for a tripartite meeting to harmonize their policies and positions on a whole host of issues.<sup>113</sup> Upon his arrival, Velayati immediately went into conference with Hafez Assad.<sup>114</sup> Meetings were also held between Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam, his Iranian counterpart and the Libyan emissary. After three days of talks, a joint Syrian-Iranian-Libyan communiqué was issued on January 23, calling for Arab solidarity with Iran and the overthrow of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, it once again reiterated Syrian and Libyan support for the Islamic Republic and emphasized the need to reactivate the Steadfastness Front, to "confront instigations by imperialism and Zionism," and the vital contribution of Iran to its cause.<sup>116</sup> In addition, the strongly-worded communiqué condemned the invasion of Lebanon and stated the authors' intention to provide financial and material support to the Lebanese resistance to terminate the Israeli occupation.<sup>117</sup> The participants also denounced "all attempts aimed at forcing the PLO to make concessions diametrically opposed to the just struggles and legitimate objectives of the organization...[and] attempts by imperialism and Zionism to create a Baghdad-Cairo axis in order to confront the revolutionary forces in the region."<sup>118</sup> The tripartite declaration opposed any actions to resuscitate the peace process as an extension of the Camp David Accords and any "attempts to return Egypt to the Arab fold and Islamic organizations unless [it rejected] the treacherous Camp David Accords."<sup>119</sup>

The tripartite meeting in Damascus undoubtedly came as a major disappointment to Riyadh in light of its strenuous efforts to induce the Assad regime to abandon its alliance with Iran. However, from the Syrian viewpoint, it made sense to bolster cooperation with Tehran and Tripoli. Support for Iran was crucial in order to check Iraqi regional ambitions and ensure that Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi Ba'th did not emerge unscathed from a conflict that they had initiated in the first place. Furthermore, Assad was not about to allow Washington to regain the initiative by implementing its strategy of hammering out a peace treaty between Israel and Lebanon and drawing both the Palestinians and Jordanians into negotiations with Tel Aviv. His intentions were to erode Yasser Arafat's power base by propping up rejectionist factions within the PLO who were engaged in a power struggle with Fatah, obstruct American plans in Lebanon to secure a peace agreement between Beirut and Tel Aviv and block or at the very least weaken the power and influence of the

emergent Cairo-Amman-Baghdad axis which had Washington and Riyadh's blessing.<sup>120</sup>

The Damascus Tripartite Communiqué drew harsh reactions from Baghdad and Amman. They accused the Syrian and Libyan regimes of betraying the pan-Arab cause and jeopardizing the security of the Arab nation by lending support and encouragement to "a war of expansionist Iranian ambitions..."<sup>121</sup> Besides attacking Damascus' and Tripoli's stance on the Gulf War, Iraq requested the Arab League in Tunis to take measures against Iran's two Arab allies to punish them for their collusion with the Islamic Republic.<sup>122</sup>

At a time when Iranian influence was waning in the Arab world, and more states were rallying to Iraq's support, the Damascus Tripartite Declaration represented a limited, but nonetheless important symbolic victory for the clerical regime in Tehran, giving it a psychological boost and enabling it to dismiss anti-Iranian Arab propaganda about the Gulf War being a continuation of the historical Arab-Persian conflict. Syria also took other measures to aid its Iranian ally to prosecute the war and preserve its growing presence in Lebanon. Damascus seems to have successfully mediated an arms-for-oil deal between Tehran and Pyongyang, and turned down a request by US envoy Philip Habib to expel the Iranian Revolutionary Guards operating in the Bekaa valley region.<sup>123</sup>

#### **IRAN'S WINTER MILITARY AND DIPLOMATIC OFFENSIVE AND SYRIA'S ROLE**

By early 1983, the hardliners on Iran's SDC led by Khomeini representative Rafsanjani were pressing for renewed military operations on Iraqi soil as soon as possible. Despite strong reservations expressed by the military high command, the radical camp believed that one more decisive engagement would turn the tide of the war. The military commanders were loath to carry out an offensive in inclement weather and use unorthodox "human-wave" tactics which would result in high casualties and possibly not yield any substantive results. The insistence of the hawks was largely based on the domestic conditions within Iraq, which led them to believe that the country was on its last legs.

Indeed there was some merit to their arguments at the time. Inside Iraq, general morale was low since the country had lost the initiative in a conflict which it clearly could not win, and was now stuck in an endless war against a relentless foe. With a population one-third of Iran's, it could not sustain a high rate of casualties. On the economic front, the destruction of its oil installations in the Gulf and the inoperability of the trans-Syrian pipeline meant that it could only export just over 600,000 b/d of oil, while Iranian production had bounced back to 3.2 million b/d in the winter of 1983.<sup>124</sup> In both Baghdad and Tehran, policymakers were convinced that time was on Iran's side. Therefore, once again, the hawks on the SDC prevailed over the better judgement of the military commanders and, on February 6, the Iranians launched Operation Wal-Fajr (At Dawn) in an attempt to seize the southern town of Amara on the Basra-Baghdad highway. After several days of heavy combat which cost both sides 7,000 to 15,000 casualties, the fighting ended in defeat for the Iranians, who failed to attain their objectives and incurred many more losses than the Iraqi defenders.<sup>125</sup>

The failure of Wal-Fajr was a significant turning point in this stage of the war, since the military brass now forcefully advocated the cessation of major offensive operations and the transformation of the conflict into a war of attrition. In the subsequent SDC deliberations the military commanders finally prevailed by arguing that exerting steady but limited pressure along the entire 650-mile front would force the Iraqis to overstretch their already scarce resources to the point that they would snap under the strain. In the aftermath of Wal-Fajr, Tehran undertook other offensive operations during 1983, but on a much more limited scale as the military had prescribed.<sup>126</sup>

In the days leading up to the Wal-Fajr attack, Syrian Information Minister Ahmad Iskandar Ahmad arrived in Tehran bearing a message from Hafez Assad for Ali Khamene'i. He also held talks with Prime Minister Musavi and Speaker Rafsanjani.<sup>127</sup> At this juncture, to complement the resumption of military operations in early 1983, Tehran also initiated a diplomatic offensive with Syrian assistance. Following deliberations with Iranian officials, Syrian envoy Ahmad flew to Riyadh to reassure the Saudis that Iran's ambitions did not extend beyond toppling Saddam Hussein. Exporting the revolution to the Gulf sheikhdoms was not part of its plans. While Iranian envoys had assuaged the concerns of some Gulf states in recent visits, the Saudis had been particularly irked by Iran's policies in the Gulf and conduct in OPEC.<sup>128</sup> In a speech reflecting the general Iranian position towards the Gulf states, Rafsanjani elucidated that:

"the Islamic Republic is generally against aggression against other countries, and particularly neighbouring Muslim countries. The concept of exporting revolution is not one of resorting to force to impose the revolution on others...[The least we expect is for the Persian Gulf countries] to maintain their neutrality if they do not want to defend justice... so that we can justify our forgiveness of these sins."<sup>129</sup>

In the disappointing aftermath of Wal-Fajr, Tehran and Damascus continued their cooperation and attempted to coordinate their actions more closely in order to prevent further erosion in their overall regional position. In late February, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ahmad Azizi was dispatched to Damascus by President Khamene'i for consultations with Hafez Assad.<sup>130</sup> The following month, in light of the rapid deterioration of Soviet-Iranian relations, reports indicate that Syria tried to mediate between the two parties; however its efforts proved futile.<sup>131</sup> With regard to military cooperation against Iraq, it is worth noting that by early 1983, Syrian military personnel had established a permanent presence at the General Headquarters of the Iranian Ministry of Defense, where they gave advice and intelligence on Iraqi military strategy, tactics, planning, training and the use of Soviet weaponry.<sup>132</sup>

By the early spring, Tehran and Damascus had stepped up their efforts to revitalize and intensify their collaboration in various ways. A new oil agreement was negotiated in early April. Under the terms of the new deal, Iran agreed to provide 5 million tons of crude oil to be paid for by a combination of hard currency and barter, and an additional one million tons of oil free of charge. Tehran justified the generous gift as a contribution to the Syrian confrontation with Israel in Lebanon. Although the original agreement negotiated the previous year had stipulated that Iran export 8 million tons of oil to its Arab ally, Syria had been unable to keep up with the payments under the

terms of the deal.<sup>133</sup>

Once the agreement had been concluded in Tehran, Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati flew to Damascus, where he held talks with Hafez Assad on "bilateral relations and issues of common interest." Subsequent reports indicated that Syria allowed Iran to increase its presence in the Bekaa area.<sup>134</sup> By now, Assad was ready, with the assistance of Tehran, to take decisive action to spoil the grand design that Washington and Tel Aviv had in mind for Lebanon. He was determined to resist what he perceived as a "US-Israeli diktat" with the political backing of Iran and the military support of the Soviet Union.<sup>135</sup>

## **THE CHANGING CALCULUS OF POWER AND THE LIMITS OF THE SYRIAN-IRANIAN ALLIANCE**

While Iran exerted efforts to mend fences with the Gulf Arab states during this period, Iraq and Egypt tried to consolidate their budding friendship. Baghdad for its part lobbied for the readmission of Egypt into the Arab League, indicated its willingness to recognize Israel based on conditions laid out in the Fez II resolution and signalled its approval of PLO-Jordanian efforts to move the peace process forward.<sup>136</sup> In a significant move on January 7, the foreign ministers of Egypt and Iraq met for the first time in four years. Following their discussions, Iraqi Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz praised Egypt for its solidarity and support for his country in the Gulf War.<sup>137</sup> A month later, Egyptian Foreign Minister Boutros-Ghali and Undersecretary and Director of the President's Office for Political Affairs, Dr. Usamah al-Baz, flew to Baghdad (on the last leg of a trip to Amman and Beirut), where they were received by Saddam Hussein. Boutros-Ghali conveyed a message from Hosni Mubarak "expressing Egypt's solidarity with Iraq in its war against the Iranian regime's aggression, which [had] Iraq and the Arab nation as its target."<sup>138</sup> Ironically, the more Tehran tried to pursue the military option in its war with Iraq, the more impetus it gave for the rapprochement between Egypt and Iraq and the formation of the Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi axis, and consequently led to the gradual diminution of Syrian-Iranian power and influence in the Middle East.

Tehran's overall policy for the prosecution of the war after the spring of 1982 was essentially flawed - on both the tactical and strategic levels. The more radical faction within the government led by Ayatollah Khomeini and Hojjatolislam Rafsanjani overestimated Iran's ability to score major victories using unorthodox methods of warfare (such as human-wave tactics and tapping into the revolutionary fervor of the volunteers and guards), and also Iran's conventional military capability. In addition, they underestimated the resilience and determination of the Iraqis to defend their homeland. Although one can only speculate in retrospect, if General Zahir-Nejhad's advice to launch offensive operations using conventional tactics after sufficient training of recruits and careful planning had been heeded, the military situation in 1983 might have been radically different. The hastily planned and poorly executed Iranian offensives between July 1982 and February 1983 not only proved futile, but more importantly, in the political sense raised fears among members of the pro-Iraqi camp, prompting them to take drastic measures in order to avert an Iranian victory. The growing Egyptian military assistance had a major impact on Iraq's military capability. Politically, the



war served as a catalyst for Iraq, Jordan and, to a lesser degree, Saudi Arabia to put aside their differences with Egypt and coordinate policies in response to the challenge posed by the ascendant Syrian-Iranian alliance. By February 1984, when Iran finally gave up on the war of attrition and reverted to launching major offensives, the calculus of power - both politically and militarily - had noticeably shifted in Iraq's favor. In reality, Iran's window of opportunity to deliver a decisive blow against its foe militarily in set-piece battles had been closed.

Conversely, Syria learned from its costly defeat by the Israelis in June 1982. Between September 1982 and April 1983, Assad lay low feigning total paralysis both in the military and political sense. He husbanded scarce resources and gradually rebuilt his conventional forces with the aid of the Soviet Union in order to assume a credible defensive posture against Washington and Tel Aviv. Concurrently, Damascus cultivated ties and forged close links with various groups in Lebanon which shared its animosity towards the United States, Israel and the Gemayel government. Many of these groups, with Iranian support, would eventually serve as the primary offensive instrument to thwart the efforts of their foes in Lebanon, without directly involving the Syrian and Iranian regimes in the tug-of-war which followed between 1983 and 1984. By the spring of 1983, Assad had strengthened his position to a degree that he felt confident to pick up the gauntlet in Lebanon.

#### **THE SYRIAN-IRANIAN STRUGGLE IN LEBANON**

Although the Persian Gulf region had been the predominant area for Syrian-Iranian activities between 1980 and 1982, by the spring of 1983 Lebanon became a major arena for Syrian-Iranian cooperation against their mutual foes, especially the United States, the Gemayel government, Israel and, to a lesser extent, France. While Syrian objectives in Lebanon were quite apparent, Iran's aims and ambitions were multi-fold, more complex and less tangible. From the very outset of the Israeli invasion, Tehran had been eager to play an active and prominent role in the unravelling Lebanese state. The Islamic Republic saw the war-torn land as an appropriate theater to export its revolution by proselytizing the local Shi'ite population, fight against Israel and its Western backers, cooperate in a meaningful way with its most valuable Arab ally, enhance its bargaining position vis-à-vis Syria (since the Syrians had been the dominant partner in the alliance after the Iraqi invasion of Iran) and, in terms of bolstering its ideological position and for propaganda purposes, explode the pro-Iraqi myth that the Islamic Republic was pursuing policies similar to those of Pahlavi Iran to subjugate the Arab nation.

The chief coordinator of Iranian activities in Syria and Lebanon was Tehran's ambassador to Damascus, Hojratolislam Ali Akbar Mohtashami. His main Syrian contact was Brigadier-General Ghazi Kan'an, head of Syrian military intelligence (G2 Section) in Lebanon. With Syrian acquiescence, Iran was able to maintain some 1,500 Revolutionary Guards in the Bekaa Valley. The Iranian contingent worked intimately with local radical Shi'ite groupings such as Hussein Musawi's Islamic Amal and Hezbollah (the Party of God), led by Abbas al-Musawi and Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli. In addition to paramilitary personnel, the Iranians brought clerics to the area to expose the

local inhabitants to their brand of religious and ideological indoctrination.<sup>139</sup> Although Ba'thi Syrians did not share revolutionary Iran's vision of turning Lebanon into an Islamic republic, they were severely constrained after their military defeat at the hands of the IDF and therefore needed Iranian assistance to coopt the largest sectarian group - the Shi'ites - as part of their strategy to wage a proxy war against the Israelis in Lebanon.

By March 1983, there were noticeable signs that Shi'ite activity was brewing in the Bekaa. In one incident, Islamic Amal militiamen and Iranian Revolutionary Guards clashed with Lebanese troops in the town of Brital, in which four Lebanese soldiers, including one colonel, were wounded.<sup>140</sup> The Iranian Revolutionary Guards and their Shi'ite Lebanese allies also attacked the Lebanese Army barracks in Ba'albek.<sup>141</sup> Concomitantly, some Iranian and Islamic Amal personnel infiltrated the Shi'ite suburbs of Beirut, where they commenced operations against the Western powers supporting the Lebanese regime.<sup>142</sup> Pro-Iranian Shi'ite militiamen skirmished intermittently with troops of the Multinational Force (MNF), particularly members of the American and French contingents. The number of these instances increased in March and April.<sup>143</sup> However, the coup de grace came on April 18 when a truck laden with explosives blew up the US embassy in Beirut, killing at least 63 people. Among the dead were the senior CIA Middle East expert, Robert Clayton Ames (Director of the CIA's Office of Analysis for the Near East and South Asia), the CIA station chief, his deputy and other agency personnel and support staff. Apparently, a secret meeting of CIA officials and agents was in progress when the blast occurred. In all, some nine CIA personnel - virtually the entire intelligence team in Beirut - was annihilated in one stroke.<sup>144</sup> Ironically, Ames, who had been a former CIA station chief in Beirut and was visiting Lebanon to investigate the new phenomenon of Shi'ite political activism and terror, ended up an unwitting victim of it.<sup>145</sup>

Although an unknown group called Islamic Jihad (Holy War) claimed responsibility for the attack, the consensus among the diplomatic community in Beirut and in Western capitals was that it had been perpetrated by radical pro-Iranian Shi'ites supported by the Syrian and Iranian governments.<sup>146</sup> Tehran was quick to deny any involvement, but most of the evidence which emerged subsequently revealed that the operation had been masterminded by Iran with Syrian complicity.<sup>147</sup>

The bombing of the US embassy did not have an immediate impact on the course of events in Lebanon. However, both symbolically and psychologically it unnerved the US government (and boosted the confidence of its foes), since the incident clearly demonstrated that the main foreign benefactor of the Gemayel regime and Israel could not effectively protect its own interests in the war-torn land. The death of Robert Ames, who had served as US Secretary of State George Shultz's right-handman on Middle Eastern affairs, was a major loss for the Reagan administration. Without his key adviser, Shultz was uncertain about the future course of action and overall policy to safeguard and promote US interests in the region.<sup>148</sup> While the Reagan administration's primary objective was to broker a bilateral peace agreement between Israel and Lebanon, Assad was determined to throw as many obstacles as he could in Washington's path to prevent the fruition of a deal. By now the whole thrust of Assad's diplomacy - and Soviet Premier Yuri Andropov's, for that

matter - was to force the US and Israel to accept their view that peace could only be achieved through collective bargaining and a comprehensive settlement involving all parties, not "piecemeal" measures such as bilateral treaties.<sup>149</sup> Indeed, the fact that Washington went to extensive lengths to enable the Israelis to achieve their goals in Lebanon, and its tendency to view and interpret regional developments through the prism of Cold War politics, coupled with Syria's military defeat at the hands of the IDF and the deterioration of Soviet-Iranian relations, prompted Andropov to take decisive steps to prop up his Arab ally militarily, as the possibility of another Syrian-Israeli confrontation began to loom on the horizon.<sup>150</sup>

Following the Israeli-Lebanese Peace Agreement on May 17, Assad reacted by raising the stakes in the confrontation against Israel. Syrian ground forces held maneuvers near the Golan Heights, and other units near the Israeli and Lebanese borders were put on alert. In addition, the Syrian military presence in Lebanon and near the Bekaa was beefed up to 50,000 men. Damascus vehemently opposed the agreement, charging that it rewarded Israel's aggression in Lebanon by granting it political and security concessions.<sup>151</sup> Assad deliberately upped the ante by daring the Israelis to assault his new protective "shield." Concomitantly, he unsheathed the "sword" by unleashing pro-Syrian Lebanese and Palestinian guerrillas against the IDF in Lebanon. There was a significant increase in the number of armed clashes between the Israelis and the pro-Syrian fighters in the month of May. Compared to the previous month, IDF casualties doubled from about 40 to 80. Assad was now fighting a war of attrition in Lebanon on his terms, determined to bleed the IDF gradually at a time when public opinion within Israel was becoming more and more disillusioned with the war and the wisdom of maintaining a military presence in Lebanon.<sup>152</sup>

As the proxy war intensified during the summer, on the political front, Syria took certain measures to bring about a coalition opposed to Amin Gemayel. These efforts culminated in the formation of the National Salvation Front on July 23, composed of Walid Jumblatt's Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), the Maronite ex-president Suleiman Franjeh and Sunni leader Rashid Karami. The new front would soon prove to be a vital instrument for the Syrians in their bid to dislodge the Lebanese Army from Mount Lebanon, once the IDF had withdrawn from the region to the Awali river in the south.<sup>153</sup> The inability of the Israeli forces to prevent the outbreak of recurrent clashes between Druze and Christian militias in the Shouf Mountains and their failure to broker a ceasefire between the warring parties left Tel Aviv with no recourse but to withdraw to more defensible positions twenty-two miles south of Beirut along the Awali river in early September.<sup>154</sup> Powerless to affect the outcome of the fighting or secure an agreement with the Druze for the replacement of the IDF presence by the pro-Gemayel Lebanese Army, Israel's decision to redeploy its forces signified the crumbling of another pillar of its grand strategy in Lebanon.<sup>155</sup> The withdrawal also coincided with renewed attempts by the Gemayel regime to reassert its control over West Beirut and the suburbs in the south. These efforts were vigorously resisted by the Shi'ites, who were subsequently joined by Druze and Sunni militiamen, in fierce clashes against the US-backed army units. The fighting, which was described as the largest engagement in the history of the Lebanese army, lasted four days, resulting in the partial rout of the anti-government militias. Although the army

was able to restore control over the heart of West Beirut, it was unsuccessful in driving the Shi'ite fighters out of the southern sections and suburbs of the city.<sup>156</sup> The Shi'ite Amal militia, which by now boasted some 10,000 seasoned fighters, was well supplied with arms by Syria, Iran and, indirectly, by the Soviet Union.<sup>157</sup> The battle for West Beirut marked a major turning point in the character of the conflict in Lebanon; the Shi'ites were now at the forefront of the struggle against the central government.<sup>158</sup>

At this juncture, Assad clearly sensed that the tide was turning and seized the initiative to reassert control over Lebanon through his various proxies and allies. With the IDF withdrawal from the Shouf mountains, the Druze launched a full-scale offensive to neutralize the Christian militias in the region that had been armed during the occupation by the Israelis and re-establish control in an area which they had traditionally viewed as part of their domain. The Druze, with the support of Palestinian, Syrian and Iranian fighters and heavy equipment provided to them by the Syrian army, were able to overwhelm the Christian militias very rapidly. The Lebanese Forces of Samir Geagea - the main opponents of the Druze in the "Mountain War" - were forced to retreat in haste. The only serious effort to resist the Druze onslaught was at the town of Behamdoun, where again the positions of the Christian forces were quickly overrun.<sup>159</sup> Within a matter of days the Druze and their allies had scored an enormous victory by seizing the Shouf and Alei regions (to the south and east of Beirut). Alarmed by the Druze victory, the government dispatched the predominantly Christian Eighth Brigade of the Lebanese Army, commanded by General Michel Aoun, to hold the key town of Souk el-Gharb on the southeastern approach to East Beirut and the presidential palace at Ba'abda. Having reached the outskirts of the capital, the Druze subsequently provided artillery support for the Shi'ite militiamen who were still fighting the Lebanese army units in the southern and western districts of the city.<sup>160</sup> A convergence of interest among the Druze and the Shi'ites, along with Syrian encouragement, led to the emergence of a Druze-Shi'ite alliance in a very short time.<sup>161</sup> During the first week of September, Damascus raised the stakes by announcing its intention to call for a complete political, economic and military boycott of the Gemayel government at the next Arab summit conference.<sup>162</sup>

As the fighting intensified in the early half of September, the Druze artillery batteries shelled MNF positions in Beirut, resulting in the death of four American and French soldiers. Paris reacted angrily, threatening to retaliate by striking at the Druze artillery emplacements in the mountains, and accused Damascus of indirect involvement in the attacks. Washington also expressed concern for the safety of its marines and pointed the finger directly at the Syrians for fomenting hostilities against the MNF contingents.<sup>163</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the shelling of the Marine barracks at the Beirut International Airport, US Navy ships off the coast of Beirut shelled Druze positions in retaliation on September 8.<sup>164</sup> This led to an escalating spiral of violence as Druze batteries promptly responded once again by bombarding US Marine positions in the same area in the days that followed.<sup>165</sup>

By the middle of the month, the fighting was primarily focused around the strategic town of Souk el-Gharb, still held by the Lebanese army. As the battle for this key position raged on, with

repeated assaults being repulsed by the Lebanese government forces, the Druze were reinforced by pro-Syrian Palestinian, Iranian and Syrian fighters. In one particular clash, a 90-man army unit of the crack 82nd Brigade was overwhelmed by a much larger force of Syrians, Palestinians and Iranians.<sup>166</sup> By the time the melee had ended, two-thirds of the Lebanese army unit had been annihilated. Reports that Syrian army troop carriers were transporting hundreds of these fighters from Ba'albek to the frontlines to assist the Druze greatly alarmed officials in Washington and Paris, who now were considering air strikes to prevent the fall of Souk el-Gharb.<sup>167</sup> Moreover, news that the Druze had penetrated the town's defenses caused panic among American and Lebanese officials, prompting them to take drastic measures to prevent its capture.<sup>168</sup>

In the aftermath of airstrikes by the Lebanese air force against Druze forces in the vicinity of Souk el-Gharb which proved to be ineffectual, American warships shelled anti-government strongholds in the same area between September 17 and 21.<sup>169</sup> With the United States now a de facto co-belligerent in the conflict, tensions rose to new heights as Syria threatened to retaliate if American forces continued to attack its allies in Lebanon.<sup>170</sup> As the fighting in and around the capital intensified, the French also joined the fray after six of their soldiers were wounded in two separate incidents. Super Etendard aircraft from the carrier *Foch*, off the Lebanese coast, bombarded artillery batteries behind Syrian lines.<sup>171</sup> Concurrently, US warships continued to pound anti-government positions as they maintained their pressure on the Lebanese Army and the American marine contingent near the airport.<sup>172</sup> Eventually, the escalating cycle of attacks and counterstrikes was broken through the mediation of Saudi envoy Prince Bandar bin Sultan. The cessation of hostilities on September 25 paved the way for the convening of the National Reconciliation Conference in Geneva.<sup>173</sup>

In many respects the three-week battle for the Shouf was the turning point in the Syrian struggle with Israel and the United States for control of Lebanon. Unable to achieve its goals or stomach further losses, Tel Aviv's decision to withdraw from the region immediately created a political vacuum which was quickly exploited by Assad and his allies. By September 24, pro-Syrian forces were in control of virtually the entire Shouf. The expulsion of the Phalange Party and the Lebanese Forces from their strongholds in the area, and the failure of the Lebanese army intervention to tip the scale, sounded the death knell of the US-Israeli scheme in Lebanon. Abandoned by the Israelis, the Gemayel regime was left to fend for itself in Beirut with the partial backing of the MNF.<sup>174</sup> The Syrians took advantage of the ceasefire to reinforce their proxies in Lebanon.<sup>175</sup>

Hopes for the beginning of a national reconciliation were quickly dashed as former President Suleiman Franjeh made the cancellation of the May 17 Israeli-Lebanese Agreement a pre-condition for attending talks between the warring factions. The other members of the pro-Syrian National Salvation Front - Walid Jumblatt and Rashid Karami - had only demanded that the abrogation of the agreement should be at the top of the agenda, not a pre-requisite for peace talks. Concomitantly, in early October, there were renewed clashes in southern suburbs of Beirut between the Lebanese Army and pro-Iranian Shi'ite fighters.<sup>176</sup> The fighting intensified as the month progressed with the

pro-Iranian militiamen targeting the Lebanese army and MNF troops. Recurrent attacks on the US Marine positions at the airport resulted in nine American casualties within a period of four days. By now both the US Marine Commander, Colonel Geraghty, and the Lebanese government pointed the finger at the pro-Iranian group, Hezbollah.<sup>177</sup>

Since September 17, when the guns of the *USS Virginia* had opened fire on pro-Syrian forces in order to avert the fall of Souk el-Gharb, the US forces had in effect become an involved party in the civil war. No longer fulfilling their role as peacekeepers, they were drawn into the conflict even further. By this stage, Washington was no longer perceived as an impartial mediator but, instead, as one of the main architects of the treaty with Israel and the primary outside power trying to perpetuate Maronite domination in Lebanon.<sup>178</sup> America's active involvement in the conflict now provided Syria, Iran and their Lebanese allies with an irresistible opportunity to cooperate closely to deliver a devastating blow to American power and prestige in the Lebanon, and concomitantly aggrandize their own position at the expense of their foes. On October 23, a suicide bomber drove a truck filled with explosives into the US Marine compound at Beirut airport in the early morning hours while most of the troops were asleep. Two hundred and forty-one American military personnel were killed in the what was later assessed to be the biggest non-nuclear explosion since the Second World War.<sup>179</sup> A few minutes after the blast, the headquarters of the French MNF force in Beirut was also demolished in a similar fashion, taking the lives of fifty-seven French paratroopers. Washington was quick to pin the blame on Tehran and Damascus. US Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger suggested that "There is a lot of circumstantial evidence...but there is much that points to the direction of Iran."<sup>180</sup> US Secretary of State George Shultz went a step further the day after the bombing, when he told a closed-door Senate meeting: "Iranian elements in Lebanon operate from behind Syrian lines and are allied with Syria. Syria must bear a share of the responsibility for any Iranian actions in Lebanon whether or not Syria knew of any specific terrorist plans."<sup>181</sup> By the end of the month, President Reagan confidently declared: "I think the evidence that I have is sufficient that this last horrendous act involved Iranian terrorists and they were facilitated in their entry and in the provision of munitions by the Syrians."<sup>182</sup>

Both Iran and Syria were quick to deny involvement in the bombings, and instead attributed them to the "heroic resistance of the Lebanese people" against the US Marines and the MNF, who were waging "a real war against the Lebanese national forces..."<sup>183</sup> Although the Islamic Jihad organization, which had carried out the bombing of the US embassy, claimed responsibility for the two attacks, most observers were convinced that Hussein Musawi's Islamic Amal had orchestrated the bombings.<sup>184</sup> Days after the incidents, US intelligence officials identified Islamic Amal as the main perpetrators, with the backing of Syria and Iran. Concurrently, the Lebanese security forces began a manhunt for the spiritual leader of the pro-Iranian Hezbollah, Sheikh Fadlallah, since reports were circulating that he had blessed the two men who participated in the two suicide missions.<sup>185</sup>

Despite the steadfast denials of Damascus and Tehran, subsequent revelations clearly demonstrated that the two operations were planned and executed with Syrian and Iranian assistance. According to the information disclosed, a \$50,000 payment was made by the Iranian embassy in

Damascus to an obscure Lebanese courier named Hassan Hamiz in order to finance the operations.<sup>186</sup> While the evidence indicated that the head of Syrian military intelligence (G2 Section) in Lebanon, Colonel Ghazi Kan'an, was aware of the whole affair, one of his associates, Lieutenant-Colonel Diyab, was one of the overall coordinators of the attacks.<sup>187</sup> Three days before the bombings, a meeting was held at the Soviet-Palestinian Friendship House in Damascus, where the details were discussed. One of those present was none other than Sheikh Fadlallah.<sup>188</sup>

With regard to the Iranian connection in the matter, the intelligence was somewhat sketchy, but several figures seem to have been associated with providing support for the activities of radical Shi'ite groups in Lebanon. Besides the instrumental role of Iran's ambassador to Damascus, Hojjatolislam Ali Akbar Mohtashami, in overseeing Iranian activities in Syria and Lebanon, Deputy Foreign Minister Hussein Sheikholislam was involved in the supervision of the bombings against the US embassy and the MNF barracks. The fact that he appeared in Damascus two days before the bombing of the US embassy in Beirut, and again four days prior to the attacks on the MNF contingents, could not have been sheer coincidence.<sup>189</sup> Although the official purpose of Sheikholislam's visit in October was to discuss the Syrian-Iranian oil trade, he is suspected of having gone to Lebanon to visit the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and give final approval to Hussein Musawi for the planned attack on the MNF forces, apparently with the full knowledge and cooperation of the Syrians.<sup>190</sup> He was scheduled to stay in Syria until at least October 24; however, he abruptly departed for Iran on October 22 - one day before the Beirut bombings.<sup>191</sup> Reports also suggested that a shadowy Iranian figure who had been sent to Lebanon in 1982, codenamed "Abu Muslih", engineered the suicide attacks with Syrian assistance.<sup>192</sup> Other Iranians who may have had some role in the planning of the explosions were Iran's military attaché in Damascus, Hussein Ahromizadeh, who served as the main liaison between the embassy and the Iranian bases in Ba'albek and Zebdani (the latter being in Syria), and Ayatollah Khomeini's personal representative in Syria, Seyyed Ahmad Fehri, who enjoyed close and intimate links with Syrian officials and Lebanese Shi'ite activists.<sup>193</sup>

An important Lebanese Shi'ite militant who played a key role in these activities was Abu Haidar Musawi (perhaps a relative of Islamic Amal leader Hussein Musawi). According to US military sources, he had close links with Damascus and Tehran and provided logistical support for the October attacks.<sup>194</sup> Not surprisingly, following the bombings, Hussein Musawi held a press conference, where he denied having any role in the attacks, but praised the two "martyrs" for their actions against the American and French forces.<sup>195</sup> Hezbollah leader Sheikh Mohammed Yazbek also saluted the suicide bombers for delivering a decisive blow against American and French might and arrogance.<sup>196</sup>

By early November, the political situation in Lebanon had come to a head, with a military showdown of some sort clearly inevitable. Syria's obstinacy on the need to abrogate the May 17 Agreement and indirect harassment of the MNF prompted Washington to augment its naval force in the eastern Mediterranean to a total of 30 warships and 300 carrier-based aircraft. The Reagan administration, convinced that Musawi's followers had orchestrated the suicide bombings with Syrian

and Iranian complicity, now conferred with the Gemayel government and its other allies about various options for retaliating against pro-Iranian and Syrian forces in Lebanon.<sup>197</sup> With the prospect of a military confrontation with the United States seemingly imminent, Syria assumed a war footing by calling up its reserves as part of a general mobilization.<sup>198</sup> The Iranian foreign ministry also issued a statement underscoring its support for Syria in light of the overt threats made by the United States and Israel to use force in Lebanon. According to the statement:

"Iran once again emphasizes its unstinting support for the fraternal country of Syria and all the Muslim and revolutionary Lebanese and Palestinian forces, and announces that...side by side with her Syrian, Palestinian and Lebanese brothers, it will defend their legitimate rights with all its power and remain at their side until the last aggressive soldier has been expelled from the region."<sup>199</sup>

In addition to the growing confrontation between the Syrian-Iranian axis and the US-French-supported Gemayel government, tensions gradually rose to new heights in southern Lebanon between the Israelis and the Shi'ites. A unique situation emerged, which was once again exploited to the maximum by Damascus and Tehran from late 1983 onward. As the constellation of forces arrayed against the Gemayel government and his backers gradually began to overwhelm them, the tide was also turning against the Israelis in the south. On October 16, while some 50,000 Lebanese Shi'ites were commemorating Ashura - the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Hussein - in the town of Nabatiya, violence erupted when an IDF convoy made an ill-timed and clumsy effort to cut through the enormous procession. The deaths of some of the mourners at the hands of the Israelis only added insult to injury. Incensed by the incident, the Shi'ites of the south stepped up their guerilla activities against the IDF in the weeks that followed, slaying some 40 Israeli soldiers by the end of the year.<sup>200</sup>

In the most notable instance, on November 4, a truck crashed through the gate of the IDF headquarters in Tyre and blew up the building. In all, some twenty-nine Israeli soldiers were killed. Once again, the finger was pointed at pro-Iranian Shi'ite radicals operating from behind Syrian lines.<sup>201</sup> In an uncharacteristic manner, retribution did not follow swiftly after the attack. Tel Aviv finally decided to conduct air strikes against two training camps in the Bekaa Valley used to train Shi'ite militants on November 15.<sup>202</sup> The Israelis claimed that retaliatory raids were initially postponed due to their assumption that the United States was planning to hit radical Shi'ite strongholds to avenge the deaths of the US Marines.<sup>203</sup>

In the aftermath of the Israeli raids, US officials stated that it was highly improbable that the US would take similar action, since the Israeli operations made the need for such measures by the United States superfluous. Moreover, they tried to make an unconvincing case that Washington had no prior knowledge of Israeli intentions and that Tel Aviv was not partially acting on their behalf.<sup>204</sup> By all accounts, American inactivity at this crucial point could be attributed to the divergence of views within the US administration about the wisdom and efficacy of air strikes. In light of the recent US invasion of Grenada, Washington's stance on the deployment of Pershing missiles in Western Europe and the growing involvement of the US MNF in the Lebanese civil war on the side of the



Maronite-dominated central government, those who had advocated caution had prevailed - at least for the moment - over the more hawkish elements who argued for launching air strikes. The administration did not want to give its Western allies the impression that it was all too willing to use military force in every international crisis, and furthermore did not want to give members of the Arab-Islamic world the impression that it was their primary enemy.<sup>205</sup>

Some 36 hours after the Israeli raids, fourteen French Super Etendard and Crusader fighter-bombers from the carrier *Clemenceau* bombed the Sheikh Abdullah barracks on the outskirts of Ba'albek, and the Khawwam hotel in the town housing Islamic Amal militiamen and Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Although Paris had vowed to avenge the deaths of its paratroopers immediately after the bombing of the French MNF headquarters, the French Defense Ministry justified the air strikes as a pre-emptive measure to deter further attacks on its forces in Lebanon.<sup>206</sup> Tehran subsequently admitted that 14 Revolutionary Guards had been killed in the Israeli and French raids. However, no accurate details were ever revealed about the number of the Lebanese Shi'ite casualties.<sup>207</sup>

The escalating spiral of hostilities in the latter half of November only served to strengthen the Syrian-Iranian entente, thereby hastening the formalization of a US-Israeli strategic partnership which had been underway for some time. Washington had initially hoped that it could convince Lebanon's warring factions to accept the May 17 Agreement and force the Syrians to withdraw from the war-torn land. Within a period of three months, there had been a dramatic reversal of fortune for Washington and its regional allies. With the Shouf now under the control of the pro-Syrian Druze forces, and the Shi'ites mounting a formidable challenge to the Lebanese Army in Beirut's suburbs and intensifying their efforts against the IDF in the south, the position of the Gemayel government and the MNF became more precarious as the days passed. By mid-November, the central government controlled less than 20 percent of Lebanon, while some 200 US Marines were withdrawn from Beirut to naval vessels of the Sixth Fleet offshore.<sup>208</sup> As the American position in the Middle East began to unravel, the administration scrambled to recoup its losses. US Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger blamed much of the happenings in Lebanon on the Islamic Republic and Ba'thi Syria. On the subject of the attacks on US forces, he explained that those responsible were "basically Iranians with the sponsorship, knowledge and authority of the Syrian government."<sup>209</sup>

Indeed, as the crisis in Lebanon reached boiling point, Tehran became more vocal in its support for Damascus and took substantive measures to harmonize policies between the two allies to a greater degree. At a press conference in Tehran on November 21, Foreign Minister Velayati emphasized that "We regard defending the people of Syria, Palestine and Lebanon in their fight against Israel and the imperialist forces as our duty and as one of the strategic objectives of our foreign policies."<sup>210</sup> A few days later, a delegation headed by Presidential Advisor Mir Salim left for Syria and Lebanon to hold talks with Hafez Assad and leaders of pro-Iranian Lebanese groups.<sup>211</sup>

Washington's initial reluctance to risk a major confrontation with Syria, and the diminution of the Gemayel regime's power, meant that a new formula would have to be adopted to offset the challenges posed to American policy in the region. The Reagan administration took decisive steps

within a matter of weeks to restore its position.

### **THE SYRIAN-IRANIAN CHALLENGE AND THE US RESPONSE IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

From the vantage point of US policymakers in the closing months of 1983, the situation in the Middle East seemed to be spiralling out of control. By the end of October, the Reagan administration was greatly alarmed by a number of important developments, and became painfully aware of the limits on American power to directly influence the course of events in Lebanon and the Persian Gulf. Damascus' ability to frustrate American policy in the Levant and Tehran's obduracy in continuing the war with Iraq prompted the Reagan administration to reformulate certain aspects of its policy, and concomitantly accelerated certain trends which had been underway for sometime. In the closing months of 1983, Washington pursued a two-pronged approach by cementing its ties with Tel Aviv and thawing relations with Baghdad in an overt attempt to confront and effectively neutralize the Syrian-Iranian threat in the two political arenas.

In reality, after the Shouf mountains had been overrun by pro-Syrian forces, and the subsequent demolition of the US Marine barracks by Syrian-Iranian agents, the Reagan administration critically reassessed its policy and adopted a more defiant political and military posture, confident that the Syrians and their allies would eventually back down. The new strategy which was articulated in National Security Directive - Number 111 (NSD #111) was the brainchild of Secretary of State George Shultz and National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane. It was officially approved by Ronald Reagan on October 29, despite the objections of Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.<sup>212</sup>

It is important to recognize that, in light of the steady stream of advanced Soviet weaponry to Syria, the presence of some 7,000 Soviet military advisors in that country and the Reagan administration's obsession with viewing the Lebanese crisis through the prism of Cold War politics, US interests were now virtually identical to those of Israel.<sup>213</sup>

Not surprisingly, the first manifestation of the response was the signing of a memorandum of understanding with Tel Aviv on strategic and political cooperation on November 29, while Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Defense Minister Moshe Arens were visiting Washington. The agreement between the two long-time allies was more of symbolic significance, aimed at demonstrating to Damascus the importance the United States attached to its special relationship with the Jewish state. It was also an implicit signal that the Reagan administration was not about to back down from its previous position on the Israeli-Lebanese accord and would not exert pressure on the Israelis to withdraw their forces from Lebanon before the Syrians, as stipulated in the agreement.<sup>214</sup> The visit by Shamir and Arens was immediately followed by the arrival of Amin Gemayel in Washington on December 1. Administration officials could do very little directly to bolster Gemayel's position. By this stage, both parties had few cards to play to avert further setbacks. Indeed it was little consolation for Gemayel to be informed that he should rely more on the IDF to extend his authority over other parts of Lebanon.<sup>215</sup>

In order to demonstrate clearly US-Israeli resolve, within a week of the signing of the

memorandum of understanding, on December 3 and 4, Israeli and American warplanes bombarded Syrian troop dispositions east of Beirut. Although the Reagan administration denied any collusion with the Shamir government, and justified the attack as an appropriate response to attempts by Syrian air defense units to shoot down US reconnaissance aircraft which had overflowed the Syrian positions, it was quite apparent from the sequence of events that Washington intended to provoke the Syrians and subsequently make a clear show of force in order to intimidate them.<sup>216</sup> The raids were meant to deliver a carefully calibrated blow to Damascus so it would bow to military force and accept the US-Israeli diktat in Lebanon.

Although the US aircraft involved in the attack hit their designated targets, the loss of two aircraft, brought down by Syrian air defenses, and the capture of an American airman transformed what was considered a successful military operation into a major political and psychological achievement for the Syrians. Indeed, the incident signified a symbolic defeat for the American military establishment. In its first direct military confrontation with the Syrians, US forces had incurred losses. Not since the Vietnam War had the United States lost combat aircraft in hostilities.<sup>217</sup> US vulnerability was further highlighted in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, when Druze artillery shelled the US MNF compound, killing eight marines.<sup>218</sup> The loss of the two warplanes and that of an Israeli aircraft in an earlier incident evinced that Damascus had markedly improved its anti-aircraft capability with Moscow's assistance.<sup>219</sup> Subsequent reports revealed that US and NATO intelligence specialists had underestimated the efficacy of Syrian air defenses.<sup>220</sup> By now, it had become quite apparent that Assad's "shield and sword" strategy was paying significant dividends.

Despite heavy bombardment of Druze positions by US naval warships, the events on that fateful day revealed that Washington's gambit to raise the stakes in its confrontation with Syria and its allies had failed. The correlation of forces had shifted to Syria's advantage in almost every respect; offensive operations by pro-Syrian forces were slowly bleeding the Gemayel government and its backers, while Damascus' conventional shield was now unquestionably operational. Moreover, Assad was willing to sustain far more casualties than his opponents could stomach.<sup>221</sup> Finding itself politically checkmated and left with no meaningful alternative course of action, the Reagan administration discontinued air attacks in Lebanon, limiting military operations to the occasional naval bombardment of enemy strongholds.

The United States was subsequently greatly alarmed and shaken by a series of suicide bombings on December 12, which targeted the US and French embassies in Kuwait and a number of other installations. Again, a shadowy organization known as "Islamic Jihad" claimed responsibility for the attacks.<sup>222</sup> Washington was quick to point the finger at pro-Iranian Arab elements in Kuwait who were opposed to French and Kuwaiti support for Iraq in the Gulf conflict, and the overall thrust of US and French Middle East policy - particularly in the Lebanon War. It interpreted the bombings as part of a broad campaign waged by Tehran and Damascus to unnerve the allies of the Gemayel government and Ba'thi Iraq.<sup>223</sup> The day after the Kuwait bombings, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, Said Raja'i-Khorrasani, bluntly stated that continued American involvement in Lebanon

would result in "further retaliations." He put the blame for the escalation of hostilities squarely on Washington and Paris and emphasized that the two powers had "lost whatever claim they had to maintaining peace and order there."<sup>224</sup>

Buoyed by their recent success, the Syrians struck a more defiant posture, again firing on US reconnaissance aircraft overflying their positions in Lebanon on December 14. US warships responded immediately by pounding Syrian anti-aircraft batteries for several days.<sup>225</sup> In the meantime, Abd al-Halim Khaddam reiterated his government's demand that the May 17 Israeli-Lebanese Agreement should be abrogated before political reconciliation could commence in Lebanon. Khaddam met twice with US envoy Donald Rumsfeld, who had been dispatched in order to defuse the potentially explosive situation and ease Syrian-American tensions. However, his efforts proved to be in vain.<sup>226</sup> In a clear indication of the weakening of US resolve, Ronald Reagan stated for the first time in mid-December that US forces would be withdrawn if Amin Gemayel failed to end the factional strife in the country.<sup>227</sup>

### **The US Overture Towards Iraq in the Overall Equation**

It is not incidental that the event which provided major impetus for the Syrian-Iranian rapprochement - namely, the 1979 Iranian Revolution - also served as an important catalyst for bringing US-Iraqi relations out of the cold affecting them since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Immediately after the overthrow of the Shah, Washington had indicated its willingness to mend fences with Baghdad.<sup>228</sup> In the subsequent period with the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran and the outbreak of the First Gulf War, both sides drew closer together.<sup>229</sup> By the end of 1982, with the Iraqi regime locked in a struggle for survival with an intractable foe, the Reagan administration had made palpable gestures by providing Baghdad with \$480 million in agricultural credits and satellite intelligence on Iranian troop movements.<sup>230</sup> This was followed by a meeting between US Secretary of State George Shultz and Iraqi Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz in Paris in April 1983, where the latter urged greater American involvement in the Gulf to impede Iranian efforts to prosecute the war.<sup>231</sup>

It is clear, that by the autumn of 1983, Iraq figured prominently in the formulation of the Reagan administration's Middle East policy. The renewed interest and importance attached to Iraq could be attributed to a new conception and critical reassessment of American strategy in the region in light of a series of major setbacks and alarming developments during this period. In the closing weeks of 1983, it had become painfully clear that Washington's bid to impose its own order in Lebanon had failed. The Gemayel regime seemed to be on the brink of collapse, Tel Aviv could do very little to alleviate the situation, and Washington now seriously began to look for a way to extricate itself from the Lebanese quagmire in a face-saving manner. Syria, with Soviet and Iranian assistance, had regained the initiative. American power and prestige had suffered a number of consecutive blows: the destruction of the US embassy in Beirut, the bombing of the US MNF compound and the loss of two warplanes.

While the Reagan administration was desperately scrambling to reformulate policy in the Levant, much to its consternation, events in the Persian Gulf also seemed to be taking a turn for the

worse. With the delivery of the French Super Etendard aircraft to Iraq (which were equipped with AM-39 Exocet missiles used to devastating effect by the Argentine air force against British vessels in the Falklands War), Iran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz if Baghdad attacked Iranian shipping in the Gulf (after repeated efforts to dissuade France from proceeding with the deal). In November, French officials confirmed that the Iraqi air force had taken possession of the warplanes the previous month. The prospect of the war now spilling over into the Gulf itself and causing disruptions to the flow of oil to world markets was quite unsettling to US officials. The growing sense of helplessness and panic in official Washington circles was reinforced by the Kuwait bombings. From the United States' perspective, Iraq could serve as a vital component in its overall Middle East strategy to check Iran's revolutionary expansionist tendencies and simultaneously exert pressure on its Ba'thi rival, Syria. US officials were also amenable to a US-Iraqi rapprochement due to Baghdad's role in facilitating the reintegration of Washington's main Arab ally - Egypt - into the Arab camp, its endorsement of the Israeli-Lebanese agreement and its moderation on issues pertaining to the Arab-Israeli peace process.<sup>232</sup>

Although some observers were puzzled by the move, it should have come as no surprise that, after failing to ease tensions with Syria following two days of talks in Damascus, US special envoy Donald Rumsfeld flew to Baghdad on December 19 to thaw relations with the Iraqi regime. Upon arrival, he immediately held talks with Tareq Aziz and subsequently delivered a written message from Ronald Reagan to Saddam Hussein. Rumsfeld expressed American readiness to re-establish full diplomatic relations with Baghdad.<sup>233</sup> Washington itself admitted that one of the aims of the visit was to wage "discreet psychological warfare" against Syria, which was impeding the successful resolution of the Lebanese civil war.<sup>234</sup> In addition, the warming of US-Iraqi relations was intended to "bring the Syrians a little closer to the edge of their seats."<sup>235</sup> The move was also another means of increasing the pressure on Damascus to withdraw its 40,000 troops from Lebanon and expanding American influence among certain Lebanese factions sympathetic to Iraq.<sup>236</sup> Apparently, the discussions also focused on US support for the proposed construction of an Iraqi oil pipeline to the Jordanian port of Aqaba to compensate for Syria's closure of the IPC pipeline in April 1982.<sup>237</sup>

The Rumsfeld visit was an important historical milestone in the evolution of US-Iraqi relations which paved the way for the resumption of full diplomatic relations in 1984. Within less than a month, Washington had taken decisive measures to strengthen ties with its long-time ally, Israel, and subsequently forge closer links with its new Arab ally, Iraq, in order to recoup its waning position in the region vis-à-vis the Syrian-Iranian axis. The American diplomatic offensive at the end of 1983 did not translate into any immediate gains, but laid the groundwork for a new American-led strategic consensus in the Middle East which would eventually limit the power and influence of the Tehran-Damascus partnership.

## THE FINAL PHASE OF THE SYRIAN-IRANIAN STRUGGLE AGAINST THE UNITED STATES IN LEBANON

While armed clashes continued in Beirut, the Shi'ite resistance in southern Lebanon stepped up its activities against the IDF in the latter half of December. The Israeli riposte was to conduct a bombing raid of the Sheikh Abdullah barracks in Ba'albek in the early hours of December 21. On the same day, two violent explosions rocked the headquarters of the French MNF contingent and a bar frequented by US servicemen, resulting in thirteen French casualties.<sup>238</sup> An anonymous caller contacted the AFP bureau in Beirut claiming that Islamic Jihad had carried out the attacks and warned that, unless the French and US forces were evacuated within ten days, "the earth would move under their feet."<sup>239</sup> Despite this incident, the next day, the French government disclosed that it would send a large arms shipment to the Lebanese army which included some 100 AMX-13 tanks, 10 Gazelle helicopter gunships and Puma transport helicopters.<sup>240</sup> The move was intended to demonstrate to the opponents of the Gemayel government that incessant attacks on French forces in Lebanon would not sway the policy of the Quai d'Orsay. The Mitterand government believed that France, due to its historical involvement in Lebanon, enjoyed a unique and advantageous capacity to bring about a national reconciliation with Gemayel still at the helm. The French were determined to frustrate Syria's aspirations to maintain its hegemony over Lebanon and hoped that their activist role in the Levant would provide the Arabs with an alternate ally, instead of turning only to the US or the Soviet Union.<sup>241</sup>

By the end of 1983, the United States had failed to bring the various parties involved in the Lebanese civil war to the negotiating table. Although Secretary of State Shultz and National Security Adviser McFarlane insisted on maintaining their course of action, Assad's "sword and shield" policy had paid handsomely. The momentum was now indisputably with the Syrians.<sup>242</sup> With the situation in Lebanon coming to a head and the date of an Islamic summit conference in Rabat drawing closer, Tehran dispatched Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Sheikholislam to Damascus on January 3, 1984, to deliver a message from President Khamene'i to Hafez Assad and discuss recent developments.<sup>243</sup> In their deliberations, Sheikholislam informed the Syrian leadership of Iran's intention to boycott the Rabat conference due to the poor state of Moroccan-Iranian relations and King Hassan's "blatant" pro-Iraqi stance in the Gulf conflict. One outcome of the talks seems to have been a hardening of the Syrian-Iranian position in Lebanon and an upsurge of activities against their common foes. This manifested itself in the assassination of the President of the American University of Beirut, Malcolm Kerr, and the kidnapping of the Saudi Consul General, Hussein Farraj, by Islamic Jihad in mid-January.<sup>244</sup>

Available evidence suggests that Islamic Jihad was initially a front used by members of the Islamic Amal movement to obscure their true identity and enable them to carry out operations against their enemies with impunity. By the end of 1983, Tehran had grown disenchanted with Hussein Musawi's failure to mobilize support among the Shi'ites in the Bekaa region and turned instead to a number of activist Shi'ite clerics to accomplish the task.<sup>245</sup> Islamic Amal eventually dissolved itself and joined Hezbollah.<sup>246</sup> However, Musawi continued to head the action wing of

Hezbollah, which still used the name "Islamic Jihad."<sup>247</sup> The United States also braced itself for more attacks against its interests in the Middle East. In reference to the looming threat, US Secretary of State Shultz posited: "we see these things increasingly originating in Iran and taking place with the acquiescence of Syria."<sup>248</sup> Alluding to earlier statements by his Syrian counterpart, Abd al-Halim Khaddam, that his country was succeeding in wearing down the United States and a collapse of the American position was imminent, Shultz was adamant that Washington would not bow to Syrian-Iranian-sponsored terrorism by withdrawing the US Marines from Beirut.<sup>249</sup>

The Tehran-Damascus axis was dealt a limited blow in late January at the Islamic summit conference in Rabat. The final resolution invited Egypt to rejoin the ICO, despite Syrian efforts to rally support against such a move. In the end, the resolution was passed 31 to 10, with the Syrian delegation walking out after the vote.<sup>250</sup> Although the non-Arab members had played an important part in the passage of the resolution, it was another significant step towards reintegrating Egypt into mainstream Arab politics. Against the backdrop of the rift between the PLO and Syria, the budding friendship between Cairo, Amman and Baghdad and Hosni Mubarak's historic meeting with PLO Chairman Arafat in December 1983, the ICO resolution underscored Egypt's gradual return to major Arab-Islamic political fora and its status as an essential actor.<sup>251</sup> Indeed, with the impending collapse of the Pax Americana-Hebraica which Washington and Tel Aviv had envisioned earlier in Lebanon, and the Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi axis still in its infancy, the early months of 1984 marked the triumph and zenith of Syrian-Iranian power and, concomitantly, its limits. The subsequent decline, which became apparent only a year later, could be attributed first and foremost to the prolongation of the Gulf conflict and Iran's inability to achieve a decisive victory, thereby magnifying Arab demands for an activist Egyptian role and, secondly, the emergence of a new Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi counteraxis, with the encouragement of Washington and Riyadh, in light of Syrian-Iranian gains in the Levant.

On January 25, a Syrian delegation led by Deputy Prime Minister Abd al-Qadir Qaddurah arrived in Tehran carrying a message from Hafez Assad for Ali Khamene'i. During the two-day visit, the Syrian representatives also met with Prime Minister Musavi and Parliamentary Speaker Rafsanjani to discuss the situation in Lebanon, Egypt's re-entry into the ICO and the need for closer economic cooperation.<sup>252</sup> Although omitted from their official statements, there is no doubt that the Syrians informed the Iranians of their intention to deliver a decisive blow against the Gemayel government. Tehran for its part advised its Arab ally of its plan to launch its first major offensive against the Iraqis in over a year in the coming weeks. Before departing for Damascus, Qaddurah declared:

"...We are side by side with our brothers and our Muslim Iranian friends, more than ever before. Both Iran and Syria are the hope of all the free and honest people of the world and our enemies intend to extinguish the light of God, but they shall never succeed."<sup>253</sup>

In early February, intense fighting broke out in Beirut between the Lebanese army and the Shi'ite Amal militia. The hostilities spread rapidly throughout the capital and the outlying areas. The

Shi'ites called for the removal of Amin Gemayel and the resignation of all Muslim cabinet members, prompting Prime Minister Shafiq Wazzan and other Muslim ministers to resign.<sup>254</sup> Without any remaining Muslim support, and with the US reluctant to involve itself, Gemayel was now left to fend for himself, hoping that the army would be able to hold its ground. Rearmed and reequipped with supplies provided by Syria and Iran, the Amal and Druze militias, backed by Syrian, pro-Syrian Palestinian and pro-Iranian Shi'ite forces, launched a coordinated offensive in the Shkhar area (between the Damour River and Beirut) and in the southern and western suburbs of the capital to wrest control from the Lebanese army. In Shkhar, the Druze fighters swiftly overran the position of the Fourth Brigade, while Amal fighters seized control of the remaining Beirut suburbs under government control.<sup>255</sup> Thousands of Muslim and Druze Lebanese army personnel heeded a call by the opposition to lay down their arms. As a result of the defections, within a matter of days the strength of the 37,000-man Lebanese army was reduced by more than half.<sup>256</sup> Two-thirds of Beirut and 80% of the country (excluding the Israeli-occupied south) came under the control of anti-Gemayel forces.<sup>257</sup>

As the fighting raged on for six days, on February 6, US President Reagan announced that the US Marines would be withdrawn from Lebanese soil before the end of the month and "redeployed" on ships off shore.<sup>258</sup> With Damascus clearly on the ascendant, Syrian officials reiterated that there would be no progress towards a political settlement unless the May 17 Agreement was abrogated, and all "foreign" troops had been withdrawn from Lebanon. However, they added that, from their viewpoint, Amin Gemayel could remain in power if he took substantive steps to reconcile differences with the Lebanese opposition.<sup>259</sup> Weakened and isolated, Amin Gemayel accepted an eight-point peace plan crafted by Saudi Arabia, which called for a full ceasefire, the replacement of the MNF by a UN force, the resumption of negotiations between the various factions in Geneva and agreement in principle on the simultaneous withdrawal of Syrian and Israeli troops. However, the main concession made by Gemayel was the abandonment of the May 17 Agreement. In exchange, according to terms stipulated in the proposal, Gemayel would be allowed to stay in office.<sup>260</sup> The events of early February put the Shi'ite Amal militia center stage as the most powerful political grouping in the country. With a decisive blow having been dealt to Gemayel's government, Amal leader Nabih Berri now demanded his removal.<sup>261</sup> However, on February 19, Berri went to Damascus to hold talks with Assad and other Lebanese opposition leaders (including Walid Jumblatt) whose presence had been requested by the Syrian leader.<sup>262</sup> Having gained the upper hand, Assad was determined to impose a Pax Syriana in Lebanon by creating a new consensus among his allies. Consequently, with events unfolding rapidly, it was deemed necessary to adopt a common position in response to the Saudi initiative.

Finally, on February 29, Amin Gemayel, desperate to preserve his remaining power, made a historic "pilgrimage" to Damascus for deliberations with Hafez Assad. He agreed to abandon his pro-Western orientation, abrogate the Lebanese-Israeli treaty and appoint the pro-Syrian Sunni Moslem leader, Rashid Karami, as the new prime minister. Four days after concluding his visit to Syria, Gemayel announced the annulment of the agreement with Israel.<sup>263</sup> A jubilant Assad



telephoned Amin Gemayel to congratulate him on his bold move, which he described as "a victory for the Lebanese and Syrian people, as well as the entire Arab nation."<sup>264</sup>

Much had been gained by Assad since the defeat of 1982. Thanks to Soviet support, neither the United States nor Israel dared risk a full-scale war with Syria, while effective use of proxies had enabled Damascus to deny Tel Aviv the fruits of its earlier success in the Lebanon war. The achievements of the Syrian-Iranian counter-offensive of 1983-84 were quite impressive in several respects. For the first time, the limits of Israeli military power had been revealed, the Reagan administration suffered its worst foreign policy setback ever, and a precedent was set whereby an Arab state rescinded an agreement reached with Israel under American auspices. Not surprisingly, by the spring of 1984, in the words of one observer, "in Damascus there [was] an intoxication of victory accompanied by much caution."<sup>265</sup> The Syrians could take pride that, in the face of what seemed to be insurmountable odds, they had turned the tables on their foes in Lebanon. On the other hand, they were well aware of the fact that they had only achieved a defensive victory. They were unable to end the sectarian strife and affect the outcome of events in the Lebanese civil war, which raged on for another six years. The limits of Syrian influence in the seamless web of Lebanese politics and the continued Israeli occupation of the south meant that the alliance with Iran still had a great deal of utility for Damascus. Iranian assistance would be essential to mobilize the Shi'ite population of the south (which had already become radicalized by the prolonged Israeli occupation) in order to wage guerrilla warfare against the IDF. Indeed, the day after the abrogation of the May 17 Agreement, an editorial in the Syrian daily *Al-Ba'th* elucidated:

"Now that the US-Israeli shadow has been removed from Lebanon by the abrogation of the agreement, the battle has become very clear. All efforts must be pooled to save Lebanon from Israeli occupation so that Lebanon can restore its independence, sovereignty and role in its Arab environment...and strip the Zionist entity of the gains it obtained through invasion and aggression."<sup>266</sup>

The way was open for the next phase of the struggle against Israel, namely, the campaign to drive the IDF from its last remaining foothold in Lebanon.

## **SYRIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS AND THE GULF WAR**

As the war dragged on in the Gulf region, Iran decided to resume the offensive in mid-summer by launching a series of limited offensives to wear down the Iraqi defenders. This was part of Tehran's overall strategy to prosecute the war of attrition. Less than a week before the beginning of the first attack (Operation Wal-Fajr 2 in Iraqi Kurdistan), Syrian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Faruq al-Shara arrived in Tehran and held talks with President Khamene'i on regional developments and ways to improve bilateral cooperation.<sup>267</sup> Exactly a week after the commencement of Wal-Fajr 2, a second offensive (codenamed Wal-Fajr 3) was begun in the south near the strategically positioned town of Mehran. Both operations proved to be limited successes for the Iranians.<sup>268</sup>

In view of Iraq's inability to influence the course of events in the ground war, Baghdad decided to improve the capability of its air force and threaten to disrupt the flow of Iranian oil out of

the Gulf unless Iran sued for peace. The French had agreed to provide Iraq with five Super Etendard aircraft in January 1983, thereby enhancing the Iraqi air force's ability to attack Iranian oil facilities and tankers. On August 12, the Iraqis declared a specified area in the northern Persian Gulf (including Kharg island) to be an exclusion zone, warning all foreign shipping to stay away. Despite thinly veiled threats and much bravado, Iraq received the Super Etendards only in October, and finally began to use them in March 1984 - once they had been properly integrated into the air force and were operational.<sup>269</sup>

As tensions gradually increased with the prospect of Iraq unleashing its air power, Iranian officials were greatly disturbed by a GCC attempt to mediate between Iraq and Syria. Concurrent with the French announcement that the Super Etendards had departed from France, on October 10, the United Arab Emirates revealed that a delegation headed by UAE President Sheikh Zayid bin Sultan al-Nahyan would visit both Baghdad and Damascus "within the framework of current Arab efforts to clear the Arab atmosphere." The UAE delegation was also accompanied by Qatari Foreign Minister Suhaym bin Hamad al-Thani.<sup>270</sup> They met with Saddam Hussein on October 9, and then held talks the following day with Hafez Assad. Concomitantly, Tareq Aziz conferred with Abd al-Halim Khaddam in New York during the UN General Assembly session. This was the first high-level exchange between Iraqi and Syrian officials since the meeting of the two heads of state at the Fez II summit in September 1982. Besides attempting to thaw Syrian-Iraqi relations, another primary objective of the mediation effort was to persuade Damascus to re-open the trans-Syrian (IPC) pipeline. Such a move would not only represent a major blow to Iran's economic warfare against Iraq, but would also substantially ease Baghdad's financial woes and enable the GCC states to cut back on their monetary assistance to the Iraqi Ba'athi regime. In response to the flurry of Arab diplomatic activity, Tehran dispatched an emissary to Damascus on October 18 to win guarantees from the Syrians that they would not be swayed by pressure from the anti-Iranian camp. The Iranian deputy foreign minister discussed the situation at hand with Hafez Assad and subsequently travelled to Libya, Algeria and South Yemen to rally some Arab support for Iran's position. The GCC initiative proved to be in vain, since no discernible change occurred in Syrian policy.<sup>271</sup>

#### **Operation Kheiber, the Tanker War and the Syrian Mediation Effort (February - May 1984)**

By early 1984, Ayatollah Khomeini and the hawks on the SDC (including Khomeini's personal representative, Rafsanjani) had become impatient with the lack of success in the war of attrition. They consequently pushed for the resumption of major military offensives against Iraq as soon as possible. Over a quarter of a million men were mobilized and, on February 22, after a series of limited probes and diversionary attacks (Wal Fajr 5 & 6), the Iranians launched their greatest offensive since 1982 - Operation Kheiber, north of Basra. The main thrust was directed at the Hawizeh marshes in order to gain a substantial foothold on Iraqi territory and cut off the Baghdad-Basra highway. The hostilities, which were some of the bloodiest in the war, raged on for more than two weeks. Eventually, when the fighting died down, the Iraqis had successfully repulsed the Iranian onslaught and inflicted enormous losses on the invaders.<sup>272</sup> Although the failure of Operation

Kheiber represented a major strategic triumph for the Iraqis, Iran was able to claim a limited, but nonetheless important tactical victory when it seized (and resisted numerous Iraqi counterattacks to regain) the oil-rich Majnoon Islands in the marshes during the offensive.<sup>273</sup> However, the overall failure of the offensive once again created dissension and led to some squabbling within the ranks of the Iranian leadership. While the hawks led by Rafsanjani advocated the resumption of full-scale military operations, President Khamene'i, Prime Minister Musavi and Foreign Minister Velayati urged caution, disavowing such a course of action for the time being.<sup>274</sup>

Operation Kheiber prompted Baghdad to step up its air offensive (which it had already initiated in January on a limited scale with occasional raids on Iranian oil facilities and shipping in the Gulf). As the fighting raged on in the Hawizeh marshes, on February 27, the Iraqi air force bombed Kharg Island. Between February 25 and March 1, seven ships were hit in the Gulf.<sup>275</sup> Overall, the Iraqi High Command's decision to initiate the "Tanker War" was based on four major considerations:

- a) To cripple the Iranian military machine by denying Tehran vital oil revenues needed to finance the war effort.
- b) To internationalize the conflict in order to rally Gulf Arab and foreign support against Iran's recalcitrant stance.
- c) To force Syria to reconsider its relationship with Iran once Arab diplomatic pressure was brought to bear and the flow of Iranian oil to its Arab ally was disrupted.
- d) To utilize the air force as an effective offensive instrument against the Iranians, in recognition of an inability to conduct any effective land or naval operations. At the time it was the only viable military option.

In short, from Baghdad's perspective, it made perfect political, economic and military sense to expand the conflict into the waters of the Gulf.

Parallel to the escalation of the Tanker War and in the wake of the battle for the Majnoon Islands, on March 7, Iraqi Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz requested the urgent convocation of Arab foreign ministers in Baghdad "to discuss the serious situation endangering the entire Arab region in the light of the escalation of Iran's aggression."<sup>276</sup> He insisted that "Iraq's sacrifices in defending the region's security should be met with an effective Arab stand."<sup>277</sup> In response, a meeting was convened on March 14 with thirteen foreign ministers and one deputy foreign minister present. Syria and Libya refused to send any representatives, while Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon and South Yemen sent low-level delegations. The result of the meeting was a reiteration of the 1950 Joint Arab Defense Agreement and a condemnation of Iran's intransigent policy of "continuing aggressions" against Iraq.<sup>278</sup> The Iranian reaction could be summed up by the comments of Prime Minister Musavi, who warned that "reactionary" states in the region supporting Iraq would be dealt with in an "appropriate" manner.<sup>279</sup> In general, Iran's renewed offensives in early 1984 and the eruption of the Tanker War had the net effect of generating regional and international pressure on Syria to reconsider its position in the conflict, galvanizing GCC support for Iraq and highlighting the need for the return of Egypt to the Arab fold, due to its political weight and military prowess.

It is worth noting that, following a visit to Syria in late February by Saudi Crown Prince

Abdullah, Rifat Assad, who opposed many of his brother's policies, mounted a direct challenge to his elder brother's authority by demanding the dismissal of Prime Minister Raouf al-Kasm and a number of other cabinet members, including the President's close aide and confidant, Defense Minister Tlas.

The Syrian leader responded immediately in a resolute fashion by calling loyal army units into the capital and arresting one of the senior commanders of the Defence Companies (Saraya Difa'a), Colonel Selim Barakat, for insubordination. The upper echelons of the officer corps were subsequently re-shuffled to weaken Rifat's power base. Many observers were convinced that Saudi Arabia had precipitated the showdown in Damascus since Rifat, who enjoyed close ties with Riyadh, objected to Syrian policy towards Iran, the PLO and the Soviet Union.<sup>280</sup>

From the early stages of the Gulf war, the Saudis had been the main financial backers of Saddam Hussein. By 1984, they were bankrolling the Iraqis to the tune of \$7-8 billion per annum. Riyadh was undoubtedly frustrated by Syria's consistent refusal to reopen the IPC pipeline, which would have substantially eased the Saudi financial burden. Despite their displeasure with Syria's posture, the Saudis continued to disburse \$750 million annually to Damascus, as had been agreed under the terms of the 1978 Arab summit agreements. The financial assistance was seen as a way of having some leverage and influence over Syrian policy, even if in only a limited sense.<sup>281</sup>

Ironically, in the aftermath of Rifat's failed putsch, the Kremlin also launched a major initiative to bring about a Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement and convince Syria to reopen the IPC pipeline. In a series of visits, Soviet First Deputy Prime Minister Geidar Aliyev and the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee's top Middle East expert, Karen Brutents, attempted to persuade Damascus to allow the Iraqi oil to flow through the pipeline as a first step towards a genuine reconciliation between the two rival wings of the Ba'th Party. The Syrians rebuffed Moscow's overtures, arguing that Syrian-Iraqi relations would have to be rebuilt on totally new foundations before they could contemplate such a move.<sup>282</sup>

The successive failures of Moscow and Riyadh to induce Damascus to realign itself with Iraq and the anti-Iranian camp augmented Syrian power and prestige both on the regional and international level. The inability of its superpower patron and a main Arab aid donor to translate their influence into an effective tool to sway it according to their wishes boosted Syria's confidence and provided greater room to maneuver in the political arena. Syria's steadfast position and unwavering support for its Persian ally were certainly noted and appreciated by officials in Tehran. At this particular juncture, during March and April, when Iraqi raids resulted in as much as a 50% drop in Iranian oil exports for some days, and the regular shipment of oil from Kharg to the Syrian port of Baniyas became highly problematic, Syria resorted to purchasing Libyan oil to make up for the shortfall.<sup>283</sup> Damascus remained stalwart in its backing of Iran, despite coming under pressure from many fronts. However, within a matter of weeks, it became apparent that the Iraqi air force was incapable of totally disrupting the flow of Iranian oil to the international market. At best, it could only achieve brief sporadic cuts in Iranian exports. Tehran, for its part, acknowledged and rewarded the loyalty of its Arab ally in late April, when it renewed its previous arrangement (during the visit of a Syrian delegation led by Oil Minister Ghazi al-Durubi) to continue the delivery of 150-160 thousand

barrels per day of Iranian crude oil to the refineries at Homs and Banias. Under the deal, one million of the 7.6 million tons of oil exported to Syria would be free of charge, while the remainder would be priced at \$25 per barrel - \$3 below the official OPEC price.<sup>284</sup>

The reciprocal moves by Tehran and Damascus to reinforce their ties and cooperation came at a time when both had become fully aware of the gradual shifts and the emergence of new political blocs in the region that were hostile to the Syrian-Iranian camp. In a significant move, Egyptian Foreign Minister Kamal Hassan Ali visited Baghdad in late March to maintain the momentum of the Iraqi-Egyptian reconciliation which had been underway for some time. In Baghdad, he met with his Iraqi counterpart, Tareq Aziz, on ways to normalize and expand relations.<sup>285</sup> At a press conference before his departure, he expressed complete support for Iraq in the Gulf war and stated that Egypt was ready to intervene militarily in the conflict if Iraq requested assistance.<sup>286</sup> Shortly afterwards, Jordan's King Hussein flew to Baghdad to confer with Saddam Hussein on regional developments and coordinate policy, particularly vis-à-vis Syria and Iran.<sup>287</sup>

With the final withdrawal of the US Sixth Fleet from Lebanon's territorial waters in the early spring, the Syrian state-controlled media boasted about the triumph over the United States and Israel.<sup>288</sup> Indeed, while the Lebanese venture proved to be the biggest foreign policy debacle of Ronald Reagan's first term, the blow was cushioned and fears in Washington were somewhat allayed by the genesis of the Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi counteraxis.<sup>289</sup> Despite the collapse of the US-Israeli "condominium" in Lebanon, Assad still needed Iran to inspire and mobilize the Shi'ites to expel the IDF from the south and counterbalance the emergent Arab camp hostile to Syrian designs in the area.<sup>290</sup> Thus, in a television interview broadcast both in Syria and the United States, Assad reasserted that:

"We consider the Islamic revolution in Iran a great victory for us, the Arabs...there is no contradiction between Arab nationalism and Iranian nationalism. Furthermore, there is no contradiction between Arab nationalism and Islam...Iran is a neighbouring Muslim country where a revolution erupted against a previous situation that did not express the Iranian people's interests. This revolution stands at the Arabs' side in their struggle against the Israeli invasion and for regaining the Palestinians' rights..."<sup>291</sup>

As the Iraqis intensified their air campaign in the Persian Gulf, on March 27, they finally unleashed the much vaunted Super Etendards, which hit three tankers in the vicinity of Kharg. A series of raids and counterraids ensued, finally compelling the Iranians to take action by attacking Saudi and Kuwaiti tankers in early May.<sup>292</sup> From Tehran's viewpoint, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were not neutral states in the conflict, but close allies of Ba'thi Iraq. This perception was reinforced by Saddam Hussein's admission in an interview with Kuwaiti journalists that Saudi AWACS had provided Iraq with valuable data and intelligence on Iranian troop movements during Operation Kheiber.<sup>293</sup> Iranian leaders had for months warned the Gulf Arab sheikhdoms to desist from their support of Iraq or face the consequences. In a sermon on May 18, Rafsanjani declared that the fact that Kuwait and Saudi Arabia sold oil on Iraq's behalf made them de facto co-belligerents in the war.<sup>294</sup>

The escalating tensions and the widening rift between Iran and the Gulf Arabs led to the convening of an Arab foreign ministers conference in Tunis on May 19 to discuss Iranian attacks on Saudi and Kuwaiti shipping. After some deliberations, a resolution was passed condemning Iranian attacks on Gulf shipping and imploring the UN Security Council to take appropriate action to prevent destabilization of the area. The resolution was passed over the objections of the Syrians and Libyans.<sup>295</sup> It is interesting to note that only Libya expressed a formal reservation; Syria was not as vocal in its protestations. The Syrians were afraid that the Iranians were falling into the trap that the Iraqis had set for them, meaning that, by attacking ships from non-combatant states, Iran was further alienating the Gulf states and the international community and concomitantly providing the West with the necessary pretext to establish a naval presence in the region. Furthermore, with the transformation of the Jordanian-Iraqi partnership in 1980 into what was emerging as a pro-American Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi-Saudi bloc by mid-1984, Damascus wanted to prevent becoming completely sidelined and isolated in inter-Arab politics.<sup>296</sup> This did not signify a shift in Syrian policy towards Iran, but was rather an indication of Damascus' displeasure with Iranian strikes on tankers belonging to the Gulf Arab littoral states and the awkward position in which it placed the Syrian Arab Republic. Therefore, the Syrians deemed it necessary to defuse the potentially explosive situation as soon as possible in order to prevent further polarization and American interference in the Gulf.

The opportunity came soon after the Tunis conference on May 22 when Saudi King Fahd dispatched the Deputy Commander of the Saudi National Guard, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Tuwaijri, to Damascus requesting Syrian intercession in the Tanker War. Assad responded promptly the next day by sending the newly-appointed Vice-President, Abd al-Halim Khaddam, and Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara on a peace mission to Tehran.<sup>297</sup> The Syrian emissaries went into session almost immediately with President Khamene'i, presidential assistant Mostafa Mir-Salim, Foreign Minister Velayati and Minister of State for Executive Affairs Aghazadeh. Khaddam conveyed a message from Assad impressing on the Iranian government the need to ease tensions and prevent any further escalation in the Gulf War, since the "grave situation" threatened the entire region and "help[ed] imperialism and Zionism to achieve their ambitions in the region."<sup>298</sup> On the same day as the arrival of the Syrian envoys, the Iranian parliament (Majles) passed a bill approving the continuation of oil deliveries to Syria and the rescheduling of Syria's oil debt, which by now amounted to \$993 million.<sup>299</sup> Recent shortfalls in Iranian oil production and the steady accumulation of a massive Syrian debt compelled the government to seek parliamentary approval before proceeding with more oil deliveries to its Arab ally. Foreign Minister Velayati argued in favor of the bill, asserting that "we have the responsibility to aid such a government in its path, especially at a time when the reactionary governments of the region, because of Syria's refusal to come to an agreement with the Iraqi regime, have cut off their aid to Syria." He added: "we must support Syria in its struggle against the United States, Israel and Iraq, which is the correct path."<sup>300</sup> On the second day of their visit, Khaddam and al-Shara met with Khomeini's representative on the SDC and Speaker of Parliament, Rafsanjani. They once again reiterated their support for the Islamic Republic in the war, but cautioned that further escalation and expansion of the war must be avoided. Rafsanjani explained

that, if the Gulf became insecure for Iranian shipping, other regions would become unstable.<sup>301</sup> At a Majles session later that same day, he repeated Iran's previous threat to close the Straits of Hormuz if it was unable to use the Gulf.<sup>302</sup>

Damascus was eager to use the mediation effort as a justification for its close ties with Tehran. According to its logic, in light of the crisis in the Gulf, the Arab world needed an effective channel of communication with the Islamic Republic to voice Arab concerns. Assad was gambling that, after having been put in an extremely awkward position with the eruption of the Tanker War, he could gain a political victory by defusing tensions and portraying himself as an Arab savior.<sup>303</sup> However, Baghdad was determined to prevent Syria from exploiting the situation to achieve a diplomatic victory. As Khaddam and al-Shara left Tehran for Jeddah to brief King Fahd on the results of their negotiations, Iraqi warplanes struck two tankers near the Iranian coast. The Iranian riposte was swift, with an attack on a vessel in Saudi waters. Thus, initial hopes that the tensions might decrease were quickly dashed after a week-long lull in the Tanker War. Saddam Hussein also promised to continue attacks on Iranian shipping and render Kharg Island useless.<sup>304</sup> Baghdad sought to discredit Syria and its alliance with Iran in the eyes of the Arabs, using every possible means.<sup>305</sup>

As far as the Iranian leadership was concerned, following the failure to score a major battlefield victory in Operation Kheiber, and the significant recurrent shortfalls in oil exports due to the efficacy of Iraqi attacks on Kharg Island, their only viable option to retaliate for the raids and deter Gulf Arab support for Iraq was to pursue in the Tanker War.<sup>306</sup> The Syrians, for their part, consistently argued that, during their deliberations with Tehran, Iranian officials had emphasized that Iraq had initiated the Tanker War, and they had no desire to escalate the conflict and threaten the Gulf sheikhdoms. Moreover, they stated their commitment to extend military assistance to the GCC members in the event of Iranian aggression.<sup>307</sup> Despite its assurances to Damascus and its desire to avoid the expansion of the conflict, Iran still felt compelled to strike back at Gulf Arab shipping in retaliation for Iraqi raids. Tensions were heightened on June 5, when Saudi F-15 fighters, assisted by US-manned AWACS, shot down an Iranian F-4 hunting for ships in Saudi territorial waters. Tehran decided to refrain from responding militarily in the Gulf, for fear of drawing outside parties into the conflict. However, an Iranian riposte came two days later in Lebanon, where an explosive device went off outside the Saudi consulate in Beirut, and Islamic Jihad gunmen stormed and occupied the Saudi embassy for thirty minutes.<sup>308</sup>

#### **IRAN'S INTERNATIONAL ISOLATION AND GROWING DEPENDENCY ON SYRIA**

The continuation of the Tanker War and the growing rift between Iran and many of its Arab neighbors prompted Tehran to launch a diplomatic offensive in the summer to mend fences with non-regional states. During early June, the Iranian foreign ministry dispatched Director-General for European and American Affairs Mohammad Sadr to Moscow in an attempt to thaw relations with the Soviet Union. This was followed by the visit of a high-level Soviet delegation to Tehran a few weeks later.

Tehran found it prudent to make an overture towards Moscow at a time when Iraq was succeeding in cultivating close ties with both the United States and the Soviet Union. Iranian officials were particularly perturbed by Baghdad's ability to forge close ties with both Superpowers at a time when they were acutely aware of their own isolation and vulnerability. The US-Iraqi rapprochement, which was paving the way for the eventual restoration of full diplomatic relations between the two countries, was quite unsettling from the Iranian perspective. Despite American claims of neutrality in the Gulf War, the Islamic Republic was far from convinced about the official US position. In late June, Dr. Kamal Kharrazi, Director of the War Information Headquarters of the SDC, announced that Iran had reliable evidence showing the US had delivered several shipments of chemical weapons to Iraq in January, before the commencement of Operation Kheiber.<sup>309</sup> Iranian frustrations were further compounded by reports that Saudi Arabia had agreed to finance \$2.5 billion worth of Iraqi arms purchases from the Soviet Union and attempts by the United Arab Emirates to induce Syria to reopen the IPC pipeline.<sup>310</sup> The overall success of Iraq's political and military strategy and the ascendancy of the moderate Arab camp on the regional scene underscored the need for greater cooperation between the main rejectionist states. Consequently, on July 10, Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati and the Secretary of the Libyan People's Bureau for Foreign Liaison, Dr. Abd al-Salam al-Turayki, arrived in Damascus for consultations with their Syrian counterpart, Faruq al-Shara. Velayati also delivered a message from President Khamene'i to Hafez Assad and held discussions with Vice-President Khaddam and Defense Minister Tlas. The Syrians once again stressed the need to prevent the hostilities from spilling over in order to avert the deployment of US naval forces in the Gulf. Velayati assured the Syrian leadership that Iranian policy precluded the spread of "turmoil" in the Gulf and the annexation of Iraqi territory.

In an interview with the Lebanese magazine *Al-Kifah al-Arabi*, on July 23, the Syrian Foreign Minister elaborated on the outcome of the meetings with Velayati by explaining:

"we and Iran have developed a complete understanding on the need to avoid expanding the area of the Iran-Iraq war, on preventing the involvement of any Gulf state in this war, on rejecting US intervention in the region's affairs, and refraining from attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf if Iraq stops its attacks on tankers...The Iranians have emphasized to us more than once that they have no ambitions against any inch of Arab territory."

He went on to point out that Iraq had initiated the Tanker War and had also attacked some Arab oil tankers in the Gulf; ultimate responsibility for the situation in the Gulf and the complications arising from it lay squarely with Baghdad. Throughout the summer, Syrian officials attempted to play down Iran's war strategy and objectives, trying to shift the blame onto Iraqi recklessness in internationalizing a conflict which it had begun and could no longer finish on its own terms. For example, in an interview published on August 4 in *Al-Majallah*, Syrian Defense Minister Tlas elucidated Syria's desire for a termination of the war. He mentioned that Damascus had obtained personal assurances from Ayatollah Khomeini that Iran would "not violate the sovereignty of any Arab country."



Iranian policy at this juncture was the pursuit of a two-pronged strategy of trying to strengthen relations with its Arab allies, and with non-regional actors which it perceived were of some importance, and concomitantly exerting greater pressure through various means on Iraq's primary backers. While the Islamic Republic avoided raising the stakes in the Gulf by adopting a less aggressive posture (for fear of alienating Syria and drawing in the United States), it tried to strike back at Iraq's allies and paymasters by mining the Red Sea. Early in the spring, when Baghdad declared the naval exclusion zone in the northern Gulf region, the Iraqi navy had mined the Iranian ports of Bushehr and Bandar Khomeini (formerly Bandar Shahpour). In reality, Iraq's mining campaign had damaged and sunk more ships than the aerial attacks by its air force. On August 1, Islamic Jihad claimed that it had laid 192 mines in the Red Sea. In the days that followed, a Turkish ship was damaged when it hit a mine, while a Liberian vessel sank after it struck another mine. On August 7, Tehran radio praised Islamic Jihad for its actions in the Red Sea. Although some members of the Iranian leadership issued numerous statements subsequently denying any involvement or link with Islamic Jihad, the inconsistency in Tehran's position seems to have been a reflection of the split within the regime on the conduct of the war and foreign affairs. This was clearly demonstrated on August 11, when the newly-elected Majles dismissed five cabinet ministers, including the minister of defense. However, the available evidence clearly suggests that Iran conducted the mining operation to create unease in the backyard of four of Iraq's main supporters, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and the Sudan. Two Iranian ships had passed through the Suez Canal on July 26, while Majles Speaker Rafsanjani had made statements earlier threatening to wage war against the pro-Iraqi camp in a new theater of operations and to attack oil installations in the Red Sea region. Egyptian Defense Minister Abu Ghazalah stated that Cairo was "seventy percent" certain that Iranian and Libyan ships had laid the mines. The Iranian state-controlled media denied any involvement in the affair and, along with Syria and Libya, pinned the blame on the US, arguing that Western imperialism had precipitated the crisis in order to return to the region after its disastrous defeat and expulsion from Lebanon.

In the midst of the brewing crisis in the Red Sea, Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir arrived on a mission in Damascus to solicit Syrian support for an end to the Gulf War. He met with Khaddam and al-Shara and later delivered a letter from the Kuwaiti Emir to Hafez Assad. His visit coincided with the arrival of the Iranian Minister of the Revolutionary Guards Corps, Mohsen Rafiqdoust. Rafiqdoust met initially with Defense Minister Tlas and Deputy Chief of Staff General Ali Aslan and subsequently delivered a message and held further discussions with Hafez Assad. The deliberations centered around the Tanker War and the situation in Lebanon. Rafiqdoust reaffirmed Iran's commitment to continue the Gulf War until the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and cooperate with Syria in the struggle against Israel. However, he assured the Syrians that the Islamic Republic would not aggravate the situation in the Gulf and had no ambitions on Arab territory. After his deliberations in Damascus, Rafiqdoust departed for Libya to harmonize positions and coordinate policy with the Qaddafi regime.

Iranian shuttle diplomacy in July and August was a direct result of the clerical leadership's

immense disappointment with the failure to achieve a major breakthrough in the Gulf War after two years, and the gradual drift towards isolation both in the regional and international arena. Iran's overtures towards the Soviet Union, Germany and Japan did not have an immediate or direct impact on its ability to successfully prosecute the war with Iraq; however, they enabled Tehran to strengthen its economic links in order to prevent a rapid deterioration in domestic conditions and continue a war of attrition against its formidable Arab foe. Iran's obstinate stand on the war, particularly in the aftermath of Operation Kheiber and the outbreak of the Tanker War, polarized the situation, thereby widening the gulf between Iran and many of its Arab neighbors. Conversely, Iran became more dependent on the ideological level of its relationship with Syria and Libya. Although it could not remain passive to Iraqi attacks on its shipping in the Gulf, it nurtured its friendship with Damascus by means of a generous oil deal and attempted to accommodate Syrian demands in Lebanon to the best of its ability.<sup>311</sup> The decision to pursue the war, punish Iraq's allies and maintain a defiant stance against an ever growing anti-Iranian coalition raised the value of the Syrian-Iranian alliance enormously in the eyes of the clerical regime. From 1984 onward, with the expulsion of the MNF and the phased withdrawal of the IDF from Lebanon, the *raison d'etre* and utility of close Syrian-Iranian cooperation in the Levant was rapidly diminishing, especially from the Syrian perspective. However, on the ideological level, the Tehran-Damascus axis provided Iran's revolutionary leaders with an avenue to continue their activities against the "Zionist entity" and dismiss pro-Iraqi accusations that the Gulf War was a historical extension of Arab-Persian rivalries. By now, the conflict with Iraq and a continued presence in Lebanon had assumed enormous ideological significance in the eyes of the Iranian leadership. Regardless of the financial, material and human costs, the government had decided to embark on a path to realize its revolutionary designs. The alliance with Syria had become a vital component - an adjunct to the pursuit and realization of those ideological objectives.

For instance, during the May parliamentary debate on the rescheduling of Syrian debts and renewal of the oil agreement, Foreign Minister Velayati pleaded emphatically for the passage of the bill in ideological terms:

"[Syria has] deep difference with Iraq... we must grab this opportunity to help keep it on the path of righteousness...I must stress that under the current circumstances the only way we can fight the Zionist regime is through our aid to Syria, to the Palestinians and to the Muslim groups in Lebanon who are determined to fight on. If we fail in this, we will be ridiculed all over the world as do-nothing phrase-mongers."<sup>312</sup>

Iranian efforts during the month of August to perpetuate and bolster the Syrian-Iranian axis coincided with an Iraqi initiative to boost relations with Egypt and Jordan. On August 12, Iraqi Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz arrived in Cairo to hold talks with Egyptian officials on ways to broaden their cooperative activities, particularly in military matters. First Deputy Prime Minister Taha Yasin Ramadan was also dispatched to Jordan to promote the expansion of commercial and economic links between the two states. Despite its failure to launch offensive military operations in the land war, Baghdad's ability to

put up a formidable defense against Iranian incursions and enlist sizeable support from the Arabs and both Superpowers gave it a major psychological boost in the life-and-death struggle against its intractable Persian foe.<sup>313</sup>

In the meantime, Iran continued to pursue a systematic campaign of terror and intimidation against Iraq's most generous financial backer, Saudi Arabia. The state-controlled media bitterly criticized Saudi financing of French and Soviet arms sales to Iraq and Riyadh's close ties with Washington and they pinned the blame for the international oil glut on Saudi overproduction. Besides trying to target vessels bound for Saudi ports in the Tanker War, and the Red Sea mining incident, Tehran enlisted the assistance of pro-Iranian groups on several occasions during the summer of 1984 to attack Saudi diplomatic outposts, most notably in Lebanon. On August 24, pro-Iranian Shi'ite militants stormed the consular section of the Saudi embassy in Beirut and set fire to the building. The demonstrators, some of them armed Hezbollah fighters, tore down the Saudi flag in the compound and raised an Iranian flag in its place.<sup>314</sup> Saudi-Iranian relations remained tense throughout this period. During the Hajj, Tehran accused Saudi security forces of harassing Iranian Sunni clergymen in Mecca and aiding and abetting a large group of Iraqis who assaulted some Iranian pilgrims.<sup>315</sup>

As the rift between revolutionary Iran and many of its immediate Arab neighbors widened, Syria and Iran took substantive steps to attune their policy objectives and collaborate more extensively in different arenas. This was highlighted by the visit of Iranian President Ali Khamene'i to Damascus on September 6. The Iranian head of state, who led a high-level delegation, was the most senior-ranking Iranian official to visit Syria since the 1979 Revolution. He was accompanied by Foreign Minister Velayati, Commander of the Army Colonel Shirazi and Minister of the Revolutionary Guard Corps Rafiqdoust. Discussions primarily revolved around greater political and military cooperation in both the Levant and the Gulf. During the three-day visit to Syria, Colonel Shirazi made an impromptu visit to Ba'albek under heavy Syrian protection, where he advised Hezbollah leaders to accept Damascus' authority in the city and concentrate their efforts on the expulsion of the IDF from the occupied south. In an earlier meeting with Hezbollah leaders in the Syrian capital, Khamene'i also underscored the necessity for "positive cooperation" with the Syrians and pledged to support the Shi'ite resistance in its struggle against the Israelis. In his discussions with Khamene'i, Assad expressed concern about the possibility of the Gulf War spreading beyond its present confines and drawing the Superpowers into the conflict. In a joint statement issued by both leaders before Khamene'i's departure from Syria, the two sides reaffirmed their commitment to assist the Lebanese resistance against the Israeli invaders, denounced Baghdad's attempts to expand the scope of the Gulf War and reiterated their support for the struggle of the Iraqi people against Saddam Hussein. The Iranian delegation subsequently flew to Libya and Algeria to seek their support for Iran's position in the Gulf War and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Khamene'i's state visit to Syria coincided with the United States vetoing a draft resolution submitted to the UN Security Council by the Lebanese government condemning Israel's heavy-handed tactics in the occupied south. The Lebanese ambassador to the United Nations expressed

"profound regret" over Washington's decision. On September 7, the Iranian Foreign Ministry issued a statement condemning American support for Israeli actions which had resulted in the deaths of "thousands of innocent Lebanese and Palestinian youths" since the Israeli invasion of June 1982.<sup>316</sup> The next day, anonymous callers informed two foreign news bureaus in Beirut that Islamic Jihad would retaliate by striking "an American installation in the Middle East soon." Therefore it came as no surprise when a suicide bomber drove a truck laden with explosives into the US embassy annex in northeastern Beirut on September 20. An hour after the incident, in a telephone call to the AFP office, Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the attack.<sup>317</sup> Despite numerous security measures taken by the US State Department and US intelligence following reports of a recent shipment of explosives from Iran to Lebanon via Syria, Washington was unable to prevent the attack on its only remaining diplomatic outpost in Lebanon.<sup>318</sup> At least fourteen people, including two Americans, were killed in the blast, while many more were injured.<sup>319</sup> It was later ascertained that Lebanese middleman Hassan Hamiz, who had been involved in financing the bombing of the US Marine barracks, was also involved in this operation. US intelligence was able to establish the identity of the suicide driver (who had two or three aliases) as a member of Hezbollah.<sup>320</sup>

There is little doubt from available evidence that this particular bombing incident, just like the previous ones, was carried out with the support of Tehran and the acquiescence of Damascus. Although tensions between the US and Syria had decreased since the withdrawal of US forces in late February, the Assad regime was determined to make the Reagan administration pay for its persistent backing of Tel Aviv by any possible means, as long as it was a low-risk strategy which would not lead to a direct US-Syrian confrontation. In the case of Iran, the clerical regime had an ideological axe to grind, since anti-Americanism was one of the cornerstones of Iran's Islamic universalist ideology. In addition, on a more practical level, harming US regional interests was seen as a way to demonstrate to Washington that its rapprochement with Baghdad and its stance on the Arab-Israeli conflict were not free of costs. Such attacks also enhanced the credibility of the Syrian and Iranian leaders, who consistently tried to portray themselves as the vanguard of progressive revolutionaries bent on ousting the American and Western imperialists from the Middle East. Anti-Americanism persisted as a common reference point in the ideological outlook and pragmatic calculations of policymakers in both Damascus and Tehran.

Although the US suffered many setbacks in the region between 1983 and 1984 at the hands of the Syrians and Iranians, by the closing months of 1984, it gradually became apparent that the Reagan administration and its Arab allies were making a major comeback in the region. The first sign of the shifting balance of power came only days after the bombing of the US embassy annex, when Jordan announced its decision to restore full diplomatic relations with Egypt after a five-year break. It was the first symbolic, but nonetheless important, step towards the formation of a new Arab alliance intended to serve as a counterweight to the Syrian-Iranian axis, which had been at its apex in the winter of 1983-84. With the Jordanian-PLO rapprochement well underway, Jordan's King Hussein believed that the only viable option to resuscitate the Arab-Israeli peace process and simultaneously isolate Syria was to mend fences with Cairo. Despite Egypt's isolation in the Arab

world, King Hussein judged the resumption of relations to be a prudent move in several respects. Egypt still carried tremendous political clout in the eyes of the Americans, Arabs and Israelis, and was playing a vital role in sustaining the Iraqi war effort against the Iranians. Furthermore, neither Washington nor Tel Aviv could afford to ignore their most valuable Arab ally, particularly at a time when Egypt was beginning to assume an activist role in regional politics. Jordan's move was the first major milestone in Egypt's gradual reintegration into mainstream Arab politics, which eventually became formalized at the November 1987 Amman summit. Its more immediate impact was that it served as a major catalyst for the formation of the emergent Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi-PLO axis. Iraq needed Egyptian assistance to build a credible defense against its intransigent Persian foe, while King Hussein and Yasser Arafat calculated that, with Egypt's weight behind them, they could adopt a more assertive stance in the Levant and neutralize Syrian dominance in the area. Assad's success in gaining a high profile in Lebanon, the Arab-Israeli arena and the Persian Gulf had convinced Amman that radical measures had to be taken to reverse the current trend. The triumph of the Syrian-Iranian alliance had been viewed with much consternation in many Arab capitals. King Hussein and Yasser Arafat firmly believed that rehabilitating Egypt's position in the Middle East far outweighed the risk of incurring the wrath of Syria and Iran, at a time when they were at the zenith of their power.

Both Syria and its superpower patron, the Soviet Union, interpreted the move as a US-backed initiative to push the Syrians off center stage and limit the Kremlin's margin for maneuver at a time when the Soviets were also attempting to mend fences with Jordan and Egypt. Indeed, due to the Reagan administration's fixation with looking at regional events through the lens of Cold War politics, US policy aimed to sideline Moscow by thwarting its two-tier approach of capitalizing on Syria's gains and simultaneously cultivating links with the moderate Arab states. Furthermore, Washington intended to deny Damascus and Tehran the fruits of their earlier victory.

Fifteen days after Jordan announced its intention to re-establish diplomatic relations, President Hosni Mubarak arrived in Jordan on a three-day state visit.<sup>321</sup> After extensive talks on ways to cooperate and expand relations, a joint communiqué was issued on October 11, in which the two parties justified the Jordanian-Egyptian entente as an effective means to "restore the Palestinian people's legitimate rights....and bolster cohesion that is essential in supporting fraternal Iraq in its just battle..."<sup>322</sup> It is worth mentioning that on a symbolic level, the Mubarak visit to Amman was an explicit gesture to other Arab states to follow in Jordan's footsteps by extending recognition to Cairo and creating a new and formidable Arab bloc.<sup>323</sup>

Both Damascus and Tehran severely rebuked King Hussein's decision to normalize relations with Egypt and Mubarak's subsequent trip to Jordan. In a sermon delivered at Tehran University on October 5, Parliament Speaker Rafsanjani delivered a scathing critique of the Jordanian move. He passionately argued that:

"...we see the Islamic Republic dealing so decisively with the Israeli issue; Lebanon, with the hard work done by Syria and by the Hezbollahi people in Lebanon, slapping the USA and global arrogance in the mouth; when the struggles in

southern Lebanon demonstrate that the people really can fight Israel...instead of renewing their [Jordan, etc.] vigour and starting to move and follow behind this Hezbollahi line of Lebanon, [they] are moving in the opposite direction and in the name of bringing Egypt back to the Arab countries' fold are themselves falling into the embrace of Israel and the USA."<sup>324</sup>

Similarly, an editorial in the Syrian daily, *Al-Ba'ath* on October 9, analyzed the emergence of "the new Arab reactionary alliance" in a disparaging manner. The article explained:

"The concept of this alliance may have been inspired by the US Administration following the defeat sustained by Washington's policy in Lebanon at the hands of Syria and its allies...Washington realized that it was essential to establish a broad regional alliance aimed at confronting this sweeping national rise that is being led by Syria in the region against all the US administration's arrangements..."

The rapid pace and direction of political developments in the region greatly alarmed Hafez Assad, who decided to visit Moscow on October 15, accompanied by a high-level delegation, to seek certain assurances from Premier Chernenko.

#### **THE IMPACT OF SOVIET MIDDLE EAST POLICY ON SYRIA'S FOREIGN RELATIONS**

For many months, the Syrians had been dismayed by the new trend in Soviet Middle East policy under the leadership of Premier Chernenko. Throughout this period, Damascus had steadily become apprehensive about Soviet intentions in the region. Upon his ascension to power, Chernenko reformulated Soviet Middle East policy in an effort to lessen dependence on Syria as the primary instrument of furthering Soviet objectives in the area and broaden support beyond the traditionally pro-Soviet radical Arab camp. In the initial phase, the new strategy proved to be quite effective. His overtures towards Amman thawed Soviet-Jordanian relations, resulting in the Jordanian Chief of Staff's visit to the USSR in August 1984 to negotiate the purchase of Soviet arms and seek clarification on the Soviet peace plan of July 29, which proposed the creation of a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation including the Occupied Territories. The Syrians were also infuriated by the restoration of Soviet-Egyptian relations during that summer. To add insult to injury, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko met with his Israeli counterpart during the UN General Assembly in New York in September 1984, and with PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat in East Berlin on October 7.<sup>325</sup> The unmistakable reorientation in Soviet Middle East policy coupled with the consolidation of the Jordanian-Egyptian entente persuaded Assad to visit Moscow to seek clarification about Soviet intentions in the region and obtain additional assistance from the Kremlin.

Assad's trip was the first since his historic visit in October 1980, which had led to the conclusion of the bilateral Friendship and Cooperation Treaty. However, on this occasion, the results were far from what Assad expected. The Soviets tried to persuade him to adopt a more conciliatory approach towards Jordan, Egypt and the PLO. They also stressed that Syria should re-evaluate its stance on the Gulf War and abandon its support for Iran. In addition, they advocated the reopening of the IPC pipeline as a first step towards Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation. Much to Assad's chagrin,

Chemenko linked any increase in Soviet economic and military aid to a Syrian rapprochement with the moderate Arab bloc involved in the peace process. In spite of the failure to reach any sort of understanding, Damascus refrained from explicitly criticizing Moscow. The Syrian media characterized the visit in very positive terms; however, for the Syrian leadership there were no illusions about the decline of Syria's importance from the Soviet perspective.<sup>326</sup>

The tepid state of Soviet-Syrian relations prompted Assad to put greater emphasis on cooperation with his regional allies and in parallel embark on a policy to ease tensions with France. Upon his return from Moscow, Assad dispatched Vice-President Khaddam to Libya and Algeria to confer with them about the recent moves of King Hussein and the need to maintain a steadfast position vis-à-vis the US and Israel.<sup>327</sup> In reality, both Damascus and Tehran were extremely concerned about the growing momentum behind various initiatives aimed at containing their combined power and influence. With American encouragement, Jordan's King Hussein was at the forefront of an overall effort to nullify the recent gains of the Tehran-Damascus axis. Less than a week after Hosni Mubarak's historic visit, the Jordanian monarch visited Baghdad to discuss the Jordanian-Egyptian rapprochement, assistance for the Iraqi war effort and US moves to bolster this nascent Arab counteraxis, designed to frustrate Syrian-Iranian intentions.<sup>328</sup> Much to the consternation of Iran, King Hussein's visit coincided with the delivery of eight new French Mirage F-1 EQ5's to Iraq. The F-1 EQ5 had a longer range than the Super Etendard and earlier versions of the Mirage F-1 received by the Iraqi air force. With a combat radius of 700 nautical miles, it was capable of hitting Iran's southernmost oil terminal in the Persian Gulf at Lavan Island. Iraq now possessed the ability to strike at any Iranian facility along the Gulf coastline.<sup>329</sup>

In the closing months of 1984, Washington made enormous strides to recoup its losses and regain its previous stature in the Middle East. In the run-up to the US presidential elections in early November, the US and Egyptian military held joint air and naval exercises in the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, the day after Ronald Reagan's election victory, US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Richard Murphy travelled to Baghdad to finalize arrangements for the restoration of US-Iraqi relations later that month.

Assad reacted to these developments by sending Vice-President Khaddam and Foreign Minister al-Shara to Tehran. The purpose of the visit was multi-fold: with a gradual improvement in Franco-Syrian relations well underway, Assad sought to bridge the existing differences between Tehran and Paris; furthermore, with the commencement of bilateral negotiations between Israel and Lebanon on troop withdrawals, he intended to gain Tehran's assurance that it would not try to aggravate the situation in the south and consequently derail the talks.<sup>330</sup> Syrian concerns came at a time when the pro-Iranian Hezbollah movement was growing rapidly and attracting a large following, in the process eclipsing the more moderate pro-Syrian Amal movement led by Nabih Berni.<sup>331</sup> Furthermore, Assad intended to moderate some of Iran's policies in the Gulf, to prevent further polarization in the region, at the expense of the Syrian-Iranian camp. Although some press reports at the time stated that the Syrians were hoping to persuade the clerical regime to end the Gulf War, this seems highly unlikely. During its one-day visit, the Syrian delegation met with Parliament

Speaker Rafsanjani, Foreign Minister Velayati and Senior Presidential Advisor Mir Salim. In addition to discussing issues pertaining to the Gulf War, Lebanon and bilateral ties, Khaddam also briefed the Iranian leadership on the results of his deliberations in Libya and Algeria. At the end of the visit Khaddam declared:

"Syria gives special priority to the strengthening of relations with Iran and views the [recent] visit of the Islamic President of Iran, Mr. Khamene'i, as an important turning point in bilateral relations and in the union of the progressive countries vis-à-vis conspiracies of imperialism, Zionism and reaction..."<sup>332</sup>

After the talks, al-Shara flew on to Riyadh to inform his Saudi counterpart, Prince Saud al-Faisal, on the results of the negotiations in Tehran.<sup>333</sup> Despite much speculation about a major diplomatic breakthrough of some sort leading to a thaw in Iran's relations with the Gulf states or France, no such changes occurred. In the period leading up to a state visit by French President François Mitterand to Syria, in the closing days of November, Assad held an interview with a group of French journalists in which he ardently defended Syria's position in the Gulf War. He vehemently denied that Syria supported Iran, but blamed Iraq for starting a conflict which clearly harmed Arab interests. He went on to posit:

"The [Iranian] Islamic revolution wants to support the Arabs...[and considers] the Palestinian cause an Iranian cause...None of the Arabs can put Iran and Israel on an equal footing. We have a certain joint history and a number of ties with Iran. Iran did not and will not claim possession of Arab territories in Iraq or in any other Arab country."<sup>334</sup>

Several days later, the French President arrived in Damascus to establish what he himself described as "more constructive relations" with the Syrians. It was the first time that a French president had visited Syria since it gained independence. In light of the historical significance of his arrival, and the marked hostility between the two states in the early 1980's, Mitterand made some conciliatory remarks by highlighting that "nothing can be achieved in the Middle East or in the Near East without Syria."<sup>335</sup> Although the visit did not bring about any major political breakthroughs, particularly with regard to the situation in Lebanon and the Persian Gulf, Franco-Syrian relations did improve to some degree as a consequence.<sup>336</sup> It was clear that Assad's intention was to jolt the Soviet Union into being more forthcoming with military and economic aid, by partially feigning a major shift in its foreign policy orientation. To underscore this point, Damascus announced its intention to acquire armaments from France and other Western countries.<sup>337</sup>

During Mitterand's visit to Syria, Iraqi Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz flew to Washington to cement relations with the United States. Following a meeting with President Reagan on November 26, a joint declaration was issued on the resumption of full diplomatic ties, effective immediately. Tareq Aziz was then whisked to a series of meetings with Vice-President Bush, Secretary of State Shultz, Defense Secretary Weinberger and National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane. The move came as no surprise: by the end of 1984, the US had provided \$450 million in financial assistance to Iraq and extended a \$663 million line of credit for the purchase of American wheat. Washington had



also consented to the delivery of 60 Bell military helicopters and several Lockheed military transport planes to Baghdad.<sup>338</sup> Predictably, the announcement was warmly welcomed by Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, while Libya, Syria and Iran bitterly criticized it as an act of "capitulation" and "treachery." The latter depicted the action as the final step in Iraq's total abandonment of the "progressive anti-imperialist" cause in order to join the ranks of the reactionary camp composed of Egypt, Jordan, Israel and the United States.

#### **THE BEGINNING OF THE DECLINE OF SYRIAN-IRANIAN POWER**

A series of events between December 1984 and March 1985 set into motion the decline of Iran's power and its ability to successfully prosecute the Gulf War. At the same time, the reversal of fortunes in the conflict and Israel's decision to begin a three-phased withdrawal from Lebanon had a profound impact on the calculus of power within the Syrian-Iranian liaison. Tehran's failure to achieve any impressive gains against Baghdad, its growing isolation in the Arab world and the growing harm it dealt to Damascus' agenda in Lebanon contributed to the transformation of the partnership into a highly asymmetrical relationship, with Syria as the dominant partner. In fact, the expanding power of radical pro-Iranian groups in Lebanon such as Hezbollah became more of a liability than an asset, since they were growing at the expense of the more moderate Amal militia backed by the Syrians. Iranian policy in Lebanon presented an obstacle to the implementation of Syrian designs, especially once it became clear that the IDF was on the retreat in the south.

To some degree the alliance became a victim of its own success. Contrary to the popular belief, from its genesis it had been a defensive alliance. Between 1980 and 1982, the Syrians provided vital assistance to their Persian allies in order to stem the Iraqi invasion of Iran and turn the tide of the war. On the other hand, from 1982 to 1985, Tehran gave invaluable support to Syria and the Lebanese Shi'ites to frustrate American and Israeli ambitions in Lebanon and eventually expel them from that war-torn land. By early 1985, it slowly became apparent that the Islamic Republic had missed a window of opportunity in 1982-84 to bring the Gulf War to a successful conclusion. This could be primarily attributed to the dismal failure of Iran's ruling clerics to consider carefully the new constellation of political forces arrayed against them and the changing balance of military power during these years. Against the better judgement of the senior military commanders, political and military exigencies were ignored in futile attempts to score a decisive battlefield victory and overthrow the Iraqi Ba'thi regime. Indeed, Iran's revolutionary fervor and missionary zeal had proven to be a double-edged sword. They had been vital in mobilizing the Iranian masses to drive the Iraqis out of their homeland, just as they had been instrumental in rallying support among the Lebanese Shi'ites to thwart American and Israeli policies in Lebanon. However, the intense determination of the clerics to export their revolution blinded their ability to recognize the resilience of their opponent and the resurgent power of the pro-Iraqi bloc, which had become unmistakably evident by the winter of 1984-85.

By now, the restoration of US-Iraqi relations and the gradual crystallization of the Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi axis boosted Iraqi morale and self-confidence. These developments, coupled with

the steady stream of French and Soviet armaments, enabled Baghdad to alleviate some of the country's economic woes and pursue a more aggressive military strategy. Starting in December, the Iraqi air force intensified its attacks on Iranian oil shipping in the Gulf. A new prolonged anti-tanker campaign was commenced and proved to be quite effective. Within a period of two months, the Iraqis struck sixteen tankers in the Gulf, cutting Iranian exports by almost half.<sup>339</sup> Iranian vulnerability was also magnified in the diplomatic arena by Hosni Mubarak's second visit to Jordan in early January. Tehran reacted by dispatching emissaries to its various Arab allies and neighbors in an effort to improve its overall regional standing and reverse the slide into isolation. Events were unfolding quite rapidly on several fronts in the Middle East, thereby necessitating some degree of policy coordination.

In addition to the Iraqi air offensive and the swift pace of Egyptian integration into regional politics, the Israeli cabinet's decision on January 14 to begin a phased withdrawal from Lebanon required some consideration by the rejectionist states.<sup>340</sup> Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Sheikholislam went to Damascus for consultations with Syrian officials and to make the arrangements for a meeting of the foreign ministers of Iran, Syria, Libya, Algeria and South Yemen. This effort resulted in a joint meeting of the Syrian, Iranian and Libyan foreign ministers in Tehran on January 26-27. The tripartite talks centered primarily on the current situation in the region and means to expand cooperation. Syrian Foreign Minister al-Shara and his Libyan counterpart al-Turayki also held a series of meetings with President Khamene'i, Majles Speaker Rafsanjani and Prime Minister Musavi.

As tensions escalated in the Gulf, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia led a GCC initiative to try to end the war. On February 2, Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir arrived in Damascus in an attempt to solicit Syrian support for a peace proposal. Parallel to this visit, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal visited Baghdad to confer with Iraqi officials. Following the departure of the Kuwaiti foreign minister, Khaddam was dispatched to Algiers to consult with President Benjedid, who was perceived as an impartial mediator by both Iran and Iraq. The plan called for a ceasefire, frontier demarcation and the reopening of the Shatt al-Arab. Suggestions were put forth to have the implementation of the peace plan supervised and guaranteed by a four-nation committee composed of representatives from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Syria and Algeria.<sup>341</sup> The initiative proved to be futile due to Iran's uncompromising position. The GCC proposal quickly faded into oblivion as Rafsanjani announced, on February 7, that the Islamic Republic would not even accept mediation by Syria and furthermore, intended to launch a major offensive against Iraq.<sup>342</sup>

It seems that, by early 1985, with the Israeli threat receding in Lebanon, and Iranian obduracy facilitating Egypt's return to the Arab fold, Damascus was becoming more amenable to a negotiated settlement. Throughout 1984, when the Shi'ite resistance in southern Lebanon stepped up its activities, there had been an average of 50 attacks on the IDF per month. By February 1985 the number had doubled.<sup>343</sup> Israeli losses amounted to more than 600 dead, and the occupation was costing \$1 million a day.<sup>344</sup> Although the Israelis were on the retreat, Syria's fears that its role might become increasingly marginalized in Arab politics was heightened by the PLO-Jordanian agreement

(in February 1985) to make a joint endeavour to revive the Arab-Israeli peace process.

### **Operation Badr and the Formalization of the Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi Entente**

On March 11, Iran launched its first major offensive since the ill-fated Operation Kheiber the previous year. The offensive, codenamed "Badr," was a duplicate of the 1984 operation, although on a relatively smaller scale. Once again the Iranians hoped to secure a bridgehead west of the Hawizeh Marshes in order to push towards Basra and other towns in the southern part of the Tigris-Euphrates Delta. Some eight divisions composed of 55,000 men (primarily Revolutionary Guards and Baseej volunteers) participated in the assault. Against the better judgement of senior military commanders, hawkish clerics on the SDC led by Majles Speaker Rafsanjani had prevailed in the internal debate once more. Initially, the Iranian forces made some impressive gains, cutting off the Basra-Baghdad highway, reaching the Tigris and inflicting heavy casualties on the Iraqi defenders. However, after absorbing the initial Iranian attack, the Iraqis swiftly regrouped and repulsed the invaders, driving them back into the marshes. After a week of heavy fighting, by March 17, the battle was over. The remnants of the Iranian force were in full retreat, and all the territory lost by the Iraqis in the early stages had been recovered. In strategic terms, it was the worst defeat suffered by Iran in the war. Both combatants incurred heavy losses; the Iraqis lost some 2,500 to 5,000 men, while Iranian losses were between 8,000 to 12,000. Although Iran had suffered greater losses in other battles, this time it had nothing to show for them. Operation Badr was a major fiasco for the Islamic Republic. The defeat sent tremors throughout the ruling establishment and eroded the credibility of the regime in the eyes of the Iranian masses.

In the meantime, Iraq continued the Tanker War in the Gulf and concomitantly opened up a large-scale aerial campaign targeting Iranian cities. The intensity of the air war was such that, within a three-day period, the Iraqi air force conducted some 158 sorties. Tehran finally felt compelled to target Baghdad and other urban centers in Iraq with Scud-B missiles, which had been supplied by Libya, and perhaps Syria. In the final analysis, Iraq had demonstrated its ability to choose and dictate the terms of engagement in the air and at sea. Moreover, in the ground war it had displayed considerable skill in conducting an effective defense. However, in political and symbolic terms, a major blow was delivered the day after the battle ended when, on March 18, Egyptian President Mubarak and Jordan's King Hussein flew to Baghdad for deliberations with Saddam Hussein and to congratulate him for the impressive victory. Much to the dismay of Iran and its Arab allies, the Mubarak-Hussein visit was a coup de theatre in regional and inter-Arab politics. The sight of Saddam Hussein in military uniform greeting the two Arab leaders at Baghdad airport and walking shoulder-to-shoulder with them had a profound psychological impact, not only on the Iraqis and their allies, but also on their opponents. The pictures and television images of the event put beyond dispute Egypt's re-entry into the Arab fold, the consolidation of this new and formidable Arab counteraxis and the growing perception that the Gulf War was indeed an Arab-Persian confrontation. After having reached its zenith in 1983-84, Syrian-Iranian power and influence was unquestionably on the decline in the spring of 1985.

## **CONCLUSION**

The period between June 1982 and March 1985 was one of the most important in the modern history of the Middle East. The events during these three years drastically altered the politics of the region. They ushered in a new era which has left an indelible mark on the international relations of the Middle East.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon strengthened the Syrian-Iranian axis, providing it with a new theater for cooperation against their mutual foes. Furthermore, the prolonged Israeli occupation radicalized the Shi'ite community, which subsequently (with Syrian and Iranian assistance) waged an effective unconventional war against the IDF, ultimately forcing the Israelis to cut their losses and withdraw from the Lebanese quagmire. Concomitantly, Iran's decision to invade Iraq in July 1982 polarized the Arab world, facilitating the reintegration of Egypt and the creation of a new moderate Arab alliance against the rejectionist states led by Syria and Iran. Furthermore, the Islamic Republic's poor conduct in the war and inability to maintain cordial relations with the Superpowers resulted in the thawing of Baghdad's relations with both Washington and Moscow. From 1984 onwards, Iraq figured prominently in American strategy towards the Middle East and played a pivotal role in the Reagan administration's overall approach to safeguarding Western interests against states such as Iran and Syria. It should be noted that Israel's failure to attain its objectives in Lebanon had a profound impact on its self-image and provided the Lebanese Shi'ites with an enormous morale booster. However, the Syrians and Iranians only achieved a limited victory on the Arab-Israeli front. Syria was unable to gain full control over Lebanon. The civil strife continued for several years. The limits of Syrian power and influence in the Levant were magnified in the winter of 1984-85 by the emergence of a loose alliance between Egypt, Jordan and the PLO, while the Syrian-Iranian axis was gradually undermined by the Baghdad-Amman-Cairo axis, with the blessing of Washington and Riyadh.

During this crucial phase, the Islamic Republic of Iran cooperated with the Syrian Arab Republic for the following reasons:

- \*To maintain an economic stranglehold over Iraq.
- \*To receive military, political, and intelligence support.
- \*To create a constituency among the Shi'ites in Lebanon to fight the Israelis, Americans and French.
- \*To gain some leverage over Syria in its backyard due to the asymmetry in the alliance.
- \*To dispel the Iraqi claim that the Gulf War was an Arab-Persian war.
- \*To counter the Baghdad-Amman-Cairo axis.

For the Syrian Arab Republic the liaison with the Islamic Republic of Iran served a variety of purposes:

- \*To check Iraqi power at a time when Syria was confronting Israel and its allies in Lebanon.
- \*To receive generous Iranian oil shipments to compensate for the shutdown of the IPC pipeline.
- \*To utilize Iranian influence to forge an alliance and control the Lebanese Shi'ites.
- \*To use the Shi'ites as an instrument to expel the Israelis, Americans and French from Lebanon.
- \*To counter the emergent Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi axis.

\*To serve as a mediator in the Gulf to extract concessions from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states and increase its influence in the area.

However, by early 1985, the new political conditions in the region eliminated much of the *raison d'être* for the alliance, thereby leading to intra-alliance tensions and the decline of Syrian-Iranian power in the Middle East. The alliance went through a critical test of strength and durability between 1985 and 1988, but managed to survive.

#### ENDNOTES

1. R. K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 181.
2. During Operations Fatah al-Mobin and Quds, some 30,000 Iraqi soldiers were killed, and 25,000 were captured by the Iranians. See Edgar O'Ballance, *The Gulf War* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988), p. 85, and Anthony H. Cordesman & Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990), p. 140.
3. See Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), pp. 98-100, and Yair Evron, *War and Intervention in Lebanon: The Syrian-Israeli Deterrence Dialogue* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), pp. 123-124.
4. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, p. 180. According to Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari, Tel Aviv had informed senior officials in the Reagan administration (including Secretary of State Alexander Haig) beforehand of its intention to invade Lebanon, and obtained their tacit approval.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 180-181.
6. See *The Guardian*, June 8, 1982, and *The Financial Times*, June 9, 1982.
7. *Dawn*, June 12, 1982.
8. BBC/SWB/ME/7048/i June 10, 1982,
9. After the Supreme Defense Council meeting, the Speaker of the Iranian Majles (Parliament) and Ayatollah Khomeini's personal representative on the SDC, Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, reiterated that the previous conditions for ending the war were the complete withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Iranian territory, payment of reparations, repatriation of Iraqi refugees and the identification of the aggressor by an impartial international body. Furthermore, he added that a route should be provided by Iraq so "we can speedily dispatch our armored forces to Syria." See BBC/SWB/ME/7052/i June 12, 1982.
10. See *The Financial Times*, June 12, 1982. and *Dawn*, June 12, 1982.
11. See *The Financial Times*, June 12, 1982, *Le Monde*, June 13/14, 1982 and BBC/SWB/ME/7051/A/24 June 14, 1982.
12. See O'Ballance, *The Gulf War*, pp. 95-96.
13. *Le Monde*, June 15, 1982, and BBC/SWB/ME/7051/i June 14, 1982. The first group consisted of 500 men. The airlift of some three contingents seems to have been completed within a four-day period. The volunteers were greeted at Damascus airport by Iranian Ambassador Hojjatolislam Mohtashami. See *The Guardian*, June 15, 1982, and *Dawn*, June 18, 1982.
14. Liz Thurgood, *The Observer News Service*, London, June 16, 1982, and BBC/SWB/ME/7051/i June 14, 1982.

15. Foreign Broadcast Information Service, South Asia, Volume VIII, No. 118, p. 14, June 18, 1982.
16. Liz Thurgood, *The Observer News Service*, London, June 16, 1982.
17. Ibid.
18. BBC/SWB/ME/7056/i June 19, 1982, and *Deutsche Presse Agentur (DPA)* report printed in *Dawn*, June 19, 1982.
19. Ibid.
20. DPA report in *Dawn*, June 19, 1982.
21. BBC/SWB/ME/7057/i June 21, 1982. On June 18, Iranian Prime Minister Musavi and his Libyan counterpart Colonel Jallud signed a protocol on military, economic and cultural matters. This included an agreement on the formation of a joint military force to fight in Lebanon, if Syria acquiesced.
22. BBC/SWB/ME/7058/i June 22, 1982.
23. BBC/SWB/ME/7060/i June 24, 1982.
24. See *The Middle East*, August 1982, and O'Ballance, *The Gulf War*, p. 95. According to O'Ballance, General Zahir-Nejhad was against the invasion. If the war had to be continued, he wanted to slow down the pace of the conflict.
25. According to former Iranian President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, Ayatollah Khomeini was obsessed with creating a Shi'ite Islamic domain encompassing Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, with him as the supreme leader. This was a primary reason for his insistence on continuing the Gulf War. His personal animosity towards Saddam Hussein also contributed to his inflexible stance on the continuation of hostilities. Conversation with Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, Versailles, France, December 1994. Also see Abolhassan Bani-Sadr's book, translated by William Ford, *My Turn to Speak* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's Inc., 1991), pp. 179, 183-184.
26. See O'Ballance, *The Gulf War*, p. 93, and BBC/SWB/ME/7065/A/15 June 30, 1982.
27. BBC/SWB/ME/7066/A/22 July 1, 1982.
28. BBC/SWB/ME/7066/A/26 July 1, 1982.
29. BBC/SWB/ME/7072/i July 8, 1982. Also see O'Ballance, *The Gulf War*, p. 93.
30. *Kayhan*, July 6, 1982.
31. Ibid., Moscow's initial reaction to the Israeli invasion was quite lukewarm. During the intense air and land battles between the Syrians and the IDF from June 6 thru 25, very little was done by the Kremlin to support its main Arab ally. See Yair Evron, *War and Intervention in Lebanon*, p. 128, and Reuven Avi-Ran, *Syrian Involvement in Lebanon Since 1975* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1991), p. 139.
32. BBC/SWB/ME/7071/A/2 July 7, 1982. Earlier in March, Cairo agreed to supply Baghdad with \$1.5 billion worth of munitions and spare parts, while the following month, on April 8, an Iraqi military delegation surreptitiously visited Egypt to request additional aid and win assurances that the flow of equipment would continue in the future. See O'Ballance, *The Gulf War*, p. 102.
33. BBC/SWB/ME/7075/A/2 July 12, 1982.

34. *Jomhuri Islami*, July 11, 1982. On the same day, Saddam Hussein rejected Iran's demand for the payment of Iraqi war reparations. See BBC/SWB/ME/7076/A/1 July 13, 1982.

35. O'Ballance, *The Gulf War*, pp. 93-94, and Anthony H. Cordesman & Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War: The Iran-Iraq War*, pp. 150-153. According to Cordesman and Wagner, Iran lost between 20 and 30 thousand men, while Iraqi casualties were about one-third of their opponent's.

36. The operation had been launched against the strong warnings of the professional military, who objected to the use of poorly-trained volunteers in massive human-wave attacks against the Iraqi defenders. General Zahir-Nejhad had wanted to postpone the offensive to give time to train new conscripts adequately, plan meticulously and make sufficient preparations to ensure victory. He had major reservations about the tactics and methods advocated by the clerics and the Revolutionary Guards. So intense was the bickering even during the offensive that, on July 23, General Zahir-Nejhad threatened to resign "if unqualified people continued to meddle with the conduct of the war." The Iranian military also dismissed the incessant rhetoric and grandiose plans espousing the establishment of a Shi'ite republic in Iraq. They were content to focus on more limited and realistic objectives such as engaging and destroying the Iraqi military machine in battle. See O'Ballance, *The Gulf War*, pp. 95-96.

37. See BBC/SWB/ME/7078/A/2 July 15, 1982, and BBC/SWB/ME/7079/i July 16, 1982.

38. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 19, 1982. During the summer of 1982, there were reports that the various Iraqi opposition groups backed by Syria and Iran were unable to agree on a common political platform and plan of action. The secular opposition led by the pro-Syrian Colonel Hassan Naqib in northern Iraq failed to reach any sort of understanding with the Iranian-supported Shi'ite opposition groups primarily operating in the south. See *Middle East International*, July 2, 1982.

39. *Ibid.*, and *Le Monde*, August 12, 1982. The Iraqi Islamic Amal Organization claimed responsibility for the attack, which it said was in retaliation for the brutal treatment of political prisoners by the Iraqi regime. It also mentioned that the attack should serve as a warning to the French government to stop supplying arms to Iraq. See BBC/SWB/ME/7103/i August 13, 1982.

40. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 19, 1982.

41. See Cordesman and Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War: The Iran-Iraq War*, p. 153, and O'Ballance, *The Gulf War*, p. 97.

42. O'Ballance, *The Gulf War*, p. 105.

43. *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, July 20, 1982. Kamal Hasan Ali stated that "Syria's stand makes us wonder because it neither supports the Palestinian force in Lebanon nor does it implement the Arab League Pact nor support Iraq in its war with Iran."

44. BBC/SWB/ME/7079/i July 16, 1979. A month later, on August 11, in a speech celebrating the anniversary of his accession to the throne, the Jordanian monarch once again called for the holding of an Arab summit meeting and declared: "The Israeli aggression against Lebanon cannot be separated from the Iranian aggression against Iraq and elsewhere. The deepening of isolation and division between Arab countries is a sign of weakness and sickness that will encourage the arrogance of those who have ambitions in Iraq, the Golan, Lebanon, Jordan, the nation's destinies and the Gulf's fortunes. The conflicting position on the Palestinian causes cannot be separated from those on the Iranian aggression against Iraq and elsewhere and the threatening of the Arab nation's security and safety. All these are in fact one foreign aggression against the Arab homeland and demand the urgent adoption of a unified Arab position....The forthcoming summit must tackle the Israeli aggression against Palestine, the people and the land, the Israeli aggression against Lebanon, the Iranian aggression against Iraq and inter-Arab relations..." See BBC/SWB/ME/7103/A/7-9 August

13, 1982.

45. BBC/SWB/ME/7123/i September 6, 1982.

46. Avi-Ran, p. 134.

47. See Efraim Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria: The Asad Years* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 67, and Avi-Ran, p.138.

48. Avi-Ran. p. 138.

49. Ibid., p. 135.

50. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1981-1982*, p. 568.

51. Another reason for the Israeli decision not to advance into the Bekaa was for fear of expanding the conflict and becoming locked in a total war with Syria.

52. *The Daily Telegraph*, June 21, 1982.

53. Ibid., and BBC/SWB/ME/7061/A/6 June 25, 1982. In addition to dispatching a small fighting force to Lebanon, Tehran stated that the Shahid Foundation and the Imam's Relief Committee had sent a sum of £100,000 to the Palestinian Red Crescent Association for the purchase of medical supplies and would also send relief aid for war victims. See BBC/SWB/ME/7063/i June 28, 1982.

54. It should be noted that by this stage there was a strong convergence of interest between Tel Aviv and Washington over the fate of Lebanon. The Reagan administration perceived the chain of events which followed the Israeli invasion as a golden opportunity to rid Lebanon of the "pro-Soviet" proxy forces of the PLO and Syria, establish a strong pro-Western central government in Beirut and enhance America's standing in the region. See Avi-Ran, p. 142, Evron, pp. 117-118, and Schiff & Ya'ari, p. 31.

55. *The Daily Telegraph*, June 29, 1982.

56. Avi-Ran, pp. 142-143.

57. Ibid., p. 143.

58. Yosef Olmert, "Iranian-Syrian Relations: Between Islam and Realpolitik," in *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, ed. David Menashri (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990), p. 177.

59. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1981-1982*, p. 253, BBC/SWB/ME/7127/i September 10, 1982, and BBC/SWB/ME/7130/A/2 September 14, 1982. In regard to the Gulf War, the resolution stated that "the conference has decided to declare its commitment to defend all the Arab territories and to consider any aggression on any Arab country as an aggression on all the Arab countries." For the full text, refer to BBC/SWB/ME/7128/A/2 September 11, 1982. On the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the final statement reflected a Syrian-Saudi compromise. Although the peace proposal put forth closely resembled the Fahd Plan (which Damascus had found objectionable the previous year), it nonetheless included important modifications such as; a) calling for the Palestinian right to self-determination under the leadership of the PLO b) indicating Arab acceptance of a Soviet role in the peace process, and c) "guaranteeing peace for all the states in the region, including an independent Palestinian state" by the UN Security Council. See *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1981-1982*, pp. 254-255, and BBC/SWB/ME/7128/A/1-2 September 11, 1982.

60. Olmert, p. 177.



61. Ibid., *Middle East International*, September 17, 1982, and BBC/SWB/ME/7128/i September 11, 1982.
62. See *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1981-1982*, pp. 256, 569, and 866, and BBC/SWB/ME/7132/A/1 September 16, 1982.
63. BBC/SWB/ME/7132/A/1 September 16, 1982.
64. BBC/SWB/ME/7132/A/1-2 September 16, 1982.
65. Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 395.
66. Seale, p. 396.
67. Olmert, p. 180.
68. Ibid.
69. Seale, p. 396.
70. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1982-1983*, p. 674, and Evron, p. 154.
71. Seale, p. 396, and Ramazani, p. 183.
72. Seale, p. 397, and Olmert, p. 180.
73. *The Daily Telegraph*, November 24, 1982, and *The Guardian*, November 24, 1982. According to reports, some 300 masked gunmen launched an assault on the 500-man post using automatic weapons and Soviet-made RPG-7's. Apparently, three of the attackers and two Lebanese soldiers were wounded in the two-hour raid. Also see *The Daily Telegraph*, November 25, 1982.
74. For further details, refer to *The Financial Times*, November 24, 1982, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, November 25, 1982.
75. Ramazani, p. 185.
76. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1982-1983*, p. 673, and Seale, pp. 396-397. For details on the origins of Islamic Amal, see Marius Deeb, *Militant Islamic Movements in Lebanon: Origins, Social Basis, and Ideology* (Georgetown University: Washington, D.C., 1986), pp. 12-13. According to some accounts, Islamic Amal militiamen fought alongside the Iranian Revolutionary Guards during the attack on the Lebanese Army barracks in Ba'albek. After the clash, Syrian military helicopters flew the bodies of the dead attackers out of the area. See BBC/SWB/ME/7192/A/8 November 25, 1982, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1982-1983*, p. 674.
77. Olmert, pp. 180-181.
78. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1982-1983*, p. 674.
79. Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, p. 396, and Evron, p. 148.
80. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1981-1982*, p. 866.
81. From Tehran's viewpoint, to add insult to injury, at Fez II the Gulf Arab sheikhdoms agreed to provide Iraq with \$6.5 billion to finance the war effort. By now, Baghdad was receiving a generous sum of approximately \$13 billion annually from the Gulf Arabs. Iraqi war expenditures were running at about \$1 billion every month. *Middle East International*, October 15, 1982.

82. For further details, see BBC/SWB/ME/7136/A/1 September 21, 1982, BBC/SWB/ME/7140/i September 25, 1982, and BBC/SWB/ME/7141/A/1 September 27, 1982.

83. O'Ballance, pp. 98-99, and Cordesman, p. 153-154.

84. See BBC/SWB/ME/7147/i October 4, 1982, BBC/SWB/ME/7148/i October 5, 1982, and BBC/SWB/ME/7149/i October 6, 1982. The Jordanian delegation included Prime Minister Badran and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Lieutenant-General Shakir. A few days later, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, accompanied by the head of Fatah's foreign relations department, Mohammed Abu Mayzar, also visited Baghdad, much to the dismay of Tehran. See BBC/SWB/ME/7150/i October 7, 1982.

85. *Al-Dustur*, October 25, 1982. An article in the Saudi daily *Al-Jazirah* the following day sharply criticized Tehran, accusing it of threatening Gulf security and stability by rejecting all mediation efforts to end the war. See *Al-Jazirah*, October 26, 1982.

86. O'Ballance, pp. 99-100, and Cordesman, pp. 154-155.

87. BBC/SWB/ME/7181/A/6 November 12, 1982.

88. BBC/SWB/ME/7189/i November 22, 1982.

89. BBC/SWB/ME/7181/i November 12, 1982. The end of Operation Muharram al-Haram coincided with the GCC leaders' summit meeting in Manama, Bahrain. In its final communiqué, the GCC Council expressed deep concern about Iran's recent moves which it claimed posed a enormous threat to "the safety and security of the Arab nation and the violation of its sovereignty." It went on to say that the Council "affirmed its support for Iraq in its endeavor to put an end to this war by peaceful means." See BBC/SWB/ME/7182/A/1 November 13, 1982.

90. *Ettela'at*, December 1, 1982.

91. BBC/SWB/ME/7205/i December 10, 1982. At the end of the visit, a joint Iranian-Libyan Communiqué was issued in which the two parties declared their support for Syria in the conflict with Israel. See BBC/SWB/ME/7209/A/1-2 December 15, 1982.

92. Fred Halliday, "Iranian Foreign Policy since 1979: Internationalism and Nationalism in the Islamic Revolution," in *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, ed. Juan R. I. Cole and Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 97.

93. According to O'Ballance, on September 26, 1982, Saddam Hussein confirmed that Moscow had resumed arms shipments and was now honoring contracts signed prior to the outbreak of the Gulf war. These shipments included MiG-25 aircraft, T-72 tanks, Scud-B and Sam-8 missiles. The Soviets also dispatched more than 1,000 military advisers and technicians to Iraq. In exchange, the Iraqi Ba'thi regime agreed to free 180 members of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) from prison. See O'Ballance, p. 103.

94. Gary Sick, "Iran's Quest for Superpower Status," *Foreign Affairs*, 65, No. 5 (Spring 1987), 709.

95. For examples of these in the latter half of 1982, see *Jomhuri Eslami*, August 22, *Ettela'at*, December 24, and BBC/SWB/ME/7214/i December 21.

96. *Ibid.*, After defecting in June 1982, Kuzichkin provided the British with a list of up to 400 Soviet and Tudeh agents operating in the Iranian government. See Fred Halliday, "Year IV of the Islamic Republic," *MERIP Reports*, March/April 1983, p. 6.

97. In November 1982 alone, over 400 Tudeh members were arrested, and the party newspaper, *Mardom* (People), was closed down. See O'Ballance, p. 111.

98. *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112. Apparently, Tudeh agents who infiltrated the Iranian armed forces had provided Moscow with valuable information about the American-made F-14 Tomcat aircraft and the Phoenix air-to-air missile.

99. The Soviets did very little to prevent the demise of the Tudeh Party. From their perspective, any decisive action against the Iranian regime would have been unwise, since Ayatollah Khomeini was still preferable to a pro-Western government in Iran. See Fred Halliday, "Year IV of the Islamic Republic," p. 6.

100. Efraim Karsh, *Soviet Policy Towards Syria Since 1970* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Ltd., 1991), p. 40.

101. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1982-1983*, p. 815.

102. Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, p. 80, and *Soviet Policy Towards Syria Since 1970*, p. 156.

103. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1982-1983*, p. 815.

104. BBC/SWB/ME/7205/i December 10, 1982

105. Referring to Iraqi readiness to resume ties on an official level, Tareq Aziz added that "as an Arab citizen, I say that this step must be taken now." *Al-Ahram*, December 28, 1982.

106. *Middle East International*, January 7, 1983.

107. BBC/SWB/ME/7226/A/6 January 8, 1983.

108. See *The Egyptian Mail*, January 22, 1983, and *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 22, 1983.

109. *Middle East International*, February 4, 1983.

110. BBC/SWB/ME/7233/i January 17, 1983.

111. Yair Hirschfeld, "The Odd Couple: Ba'thist Syria and Khomeini's Iran," in *Syria under Assad: Domestic Constraints and Regional Risks*, ed. Avner Yaniv and Moshe Ma'oz (New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), pp. 115 and 118.

112. Hirschfeld, p. 110.

113. BBC/SWB/ME/7237/i January 21, 1983 and *The Egyptian Mail*, January 22, 1983.

114. *The Egyptian Mail*, January 22, 1983.

115. *The New York Times*, January 23, 1983. Also see *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, January 23/24, 1983.

116. BBC/SWB/ME/7240/A/2 January 25, 1983, and *The Guardian*, January 24, 1983.

117. BBC/SWB/ME/7240/A/1 January 25, 1983, and Deutsche Press Agentur (DPA) press release printed in *Dawn*, January 24, 1983.

118. BBC/SWB/ME/7240/A/1 January 25, 1983.

119. *Ibid.*

120. See *The Middle East International*, February 4, 1983.

121. BBC/SWB/ME/7241/A/2. For further details on Iraqi and Jordanian statements regarding the

joint communiqué see BBC/SWB/ME/7241/A/1-2, *Le Monde*, January 25, 1983, *Dawn*, January 27, 1983, and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, January 28, 1983.

122. BBC/SWB/ME/7242/i January 27, 1983.

123. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1982-1983*, p. 813. Under the terms of the barter agreement, Iran received 150 T-62 tanks, 400 artillery pieces, 1,000 mortars, 600 anti-aircraft guns, and 12,000 automatic weapons and ammunition from North Korea. See O'Ballance, pp. 103-104.

124. *Middle East International*, February 4, 1983.

125. O'Ballance, pp. 114-116. During the Wal-Fajr offensive, Major-General Hisham al-Fakhri, the Commander of Iraq's IV Army Corps responsible for the defense of the Amara area claimed that Iran was receiving military supplies from Syria and Libya. BBC/SWB/ME/7254/i February 10, 1983.

126. O'Ballance, pp. 116-118.

127. BBC/SWB/ME/7248/i February 3, 1983.

128. *Middle East International*, February 18, 1983. It is worth mentioning that Saudi Arabia had promised the Iraqis financial assistance to the sum of \$6 billion.

129. BBC/SWB/ME/7251/A/6-7 February 7, 1983.

130. *Dawn*, February 26, 1983. In mid-February, an Iranian delegation from the Energy and Petroleum Ministry led by Assistant Minister Dr. Sahabi travelled to Damascus for talks with the Syrian Minister of Oil and Natural Resources Abd al-Jabbar al-Dahhak to promote technical and scientific cooperation and expand ties in the exploitation of various energy resources. BBC/SWB/ME/7260/A/13 February 17, 1983.

131. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1982-1983*, p. 815.

132. O'Ballance, p. 121.

133. *The Financial Times*, April 7, 1983.

134. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1982-1983*, p. 815. The high-level three-hour meeting was also attended by Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam, Iran's ambassador to Damascus and the Iranian Undersecretary for Asian and African Affairs. See BBC/SWB/ME/7307/A/11 April 14, 1983.

135. For details of Soviet arms transfers to Syria, see Karsh, *Soviet Policy Towards Syria Since 1970*, p. 41, and *Middle East International*, February 15, 1983.

136. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, January 28, 1983.

137. BBC/SWB/ME/7227/i January 10, 1983.

138. BBC/SWB/ME/7254/i February 10, 1983, and BBC/SWB/ME/7255/i February 11, 1983.

139. Olmert, pp. 180-181. Also see Avi-Ran, pp. 171-173.

140. BBC/SWB/ME/7276/A/7 March 8, 1983.

141. Olmert, p. 180, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1982-1983*, p. 674.

142. *Ibid.* In March, they are believed to have carried out an attack on a US Marine patrol which was part of the Multinational Force (MNF) supporting the Gemayel government in Beirut. See *The*

*Guardian*, April 19, 1983.

143. See *The Guardian*, April 19, 1983, and *The Financial Times*, April 19, 1983.

144. For further details see Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage: The Wrath of Militant Islam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), pp. 15-16, and *In the Name of God: The Khomeini Decade* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd., 1990), p. 117, Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1987), pp. 245-247, *The International Herald Tribune*, April 20, 1983, *The Guardian*, April 20, 1983, *Le Monde*, April 22, 1983, *The Daily Telegraph*, April 27, 1983, and *The International Herald Tribune*, April 27, 1983.

145. Seale, p. 406.

146. See *The Observer*, April 24, 1983, and Woodward, pp. 245-247, 362-363. According to Ambassador Richard Murphy, who served from 1983 to 1989 as US Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East and South Asia, Washington was convinced of Iranian-Syrian involvement in the attack on the US embassy in Beirut. Conversation with Ambassador Richard Murphy, London, November 1995.

147. *Ettela'at*, April 19, 1983, and BBC/SWB/ME/7312/i April 20, 1983. Woodward states that the National Security Agency (NSA) had been intercepting and deciphering coded electronic messages from the Iranian Foreign Ministry in Tehran to its embassies in Damascus and Beirut. They were able to determine that an operation against an American target was being planned, and a payment of \$25,000 was made in Lebanon for this purpose. Moreover, they were convinced that, at the very least, Syrian intelligence must have been aware of the preparations for the attack. CIA Director William Casey was certain that both Tehran and Damascus had a hand in the operation. See Woodward, pp. 245-247, 362-363, and *Le Monde*, May 18, 1983 for more details. According to one account, the Soviets provided the Syrians with the intelligence about the scheduled, high-level CIA meeting in the US embassy. The Syrians subsequently shared the information with the Iranians, and then jointly proceeded to plan the attack. See Hala Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance* (London: Fourth Estate Ltd., 1997), p. 81.

148. Seale, p. 406. Ambassador Richard Murphy confirmed that the death of Ames, an able and gifted man, was a major blow to Shultz, who had relied on his advice for Middle Eastern affairs. Conversation with Ambassador Richard Murphy, London, November 1995.

149. *The Observer*, May 29, 1983.

150. For an excellent analysis of the Soviet military and political relationship with Syria during this period, refer to Eric Rouleau's article in *Le Monde*, May 26, 1983.

151. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 28/29, 1983, and also see *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 31, 1983. According to former US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy, the terms of the May 17 accord had been basically dictated by Ariel Sharon and other senior figures in the IDF. Conversation with Ambassador Richard Murphy, London, November 1995. In essence, Washington went along with Tel Aviv's plan to impose humiliating terms on Beirut and bring Lebanon firmly into Israel's orbit.

152. *The Guardian*, May 31, 1983. By the end of May 1983, 490 Israeli soldiers had been killed in Lebanon, while another 2,951 had been wounded. See *The Daily Telegraph*, May 31, 1983.

153. Avi-Ran, pp. 159-160.

154. Wright, p. 77.

155. Avi-Ran, p. 164.

156. Wright, p. 76.

157. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 14, 1983.

158. According to Wright, the Lebanese Army sent in some 13,000 troops - 40% of its entire force - to participate in the operation against the Moslem and Druze fighters in West Beirut. The army suffered 200 casualties, while six American Marines and French paratroopers of the MNF were killed and ten others wounded in the fighting against the Shi'ite militiamen. See Wright, pp. 75-76, *Le Monde*, August 26, 1983, *The International Herald Tribune*, August 29, 1983, and *The Financial Times*, August 30, 1983.

159. The fall of Behamdoun represented a major setback for the Christian forces, since it enabled the Druze fighters to link up with the Syrian forces positioned along the Beirut-Damascus highway. See *The Financial Times*, September 14, 1983.

160. *The International Herald Tribune*, August 31, 1983. In addition to providing artillery support for the Shi'ite forces in Beirut, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt called for "all-out support" for the Shi'ite Amal militia led by Nabih Berri.

161. *The Daily Telegraph*, August 31, 1983. Both the Shi'ites and the Druze were resentful of the Gemayel regime's support for the Christian Phalangist Party and the Lebanese Forces, and American backing for the Lebanese Army. Jumblatt in fact threatened to attack the U.S. Marines and other MNF contingents if they did not remain neutral. He accused the U.S. of siding with the pro-Gemayel Lebanese army by providing it with logistical support and training. See *The International Herald Tribune*, September 2, 1983.

162. *The Financial Times*, September 6, 1983. Assad spared no effort in this period to utilize all available resources and support he could muster to challenge his opponents in Lebanon. For example, in the northern city of Tripoli, the pro-Syrian Islamic Unification Movement battled with pro-Iraqi Ba'athists, which resulted in some 40 casualties. See *Le Monde*, September 1, 1983.

163. For further details on American and French reaction to these developments, see *The Financial Times*, September 8, 1983, *The International Herald Tribune*, September 8, 1983, and *Le Monde*, September 10, 1983.

164. *The International Herald Tribune*, September 9, 1983.

165. *The International Herald Tribune*, September 10/11, 1983.

166. *The Guardian*, September 14, 1983. Souk el-Gharb was of vital importance to both sides, since it lay between the Druze forward positions in the Shouf mountains and the southern suburbs of West Beirut, where the Shi'ite militias were concentrated. The fall of the town would have meant that the Druze and Shi'ites would be able to link up and threaten the Gemayel loyalists in East Beirut on three sides.

167. *The Times*, September 12, 1983, and *The International Herald Tribune*, September 12, 1983. Within a matter of a few days, President Reagan authorized the use of air strikes to protect the U.S. Marine positions in the event of shelling. Concomitantly, the State Department stated that Syrian soldiers disguised as Lebanese militiamen and Iranian Revolutionary Guards were taking part in the fighting against the Lebanese Army. See *The International Herald Tribune*, September 14, 1983.

168. *The Financial Times*, September 20, 1983.

169. *The International Herald Tribune*, September 19 and 20, 1983, and *Le Monde*, September 21, 1983.

170. *The Financial Times*, September 19, 1983.

171. See *The Financial Times*, September 23, 1983, *The International Herald Tribune*, September 23, 1983, and *Le Monde*, September 24, 1983.

172. *The International Herald Tribune*, September 24/25, 1983.

173. *The Financial Times*, September 26, 1983, and *Avi-Ran*, p. 164.

174. Seale, pp. 414-415.

175. *The Times*, September 28, 1983. For details on the confrontation between Assad and Arafat see Seale, p. 411.

176. *The International Herald Tribune*, October 5, 1983.

177. *The International Herald Tribune*, October 18, 1983. In total, two US Marines and two Lebanese soldiers were killed, while seven US Marines, three Italian soldiers and one Lebanese soldier were wounded in the four days of fighting against the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militiamen. By now, the American, French and Italian MNF contingents had suffered 136 casualties. It is worth noting that 113 of these were American and French.

178. Former US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy admitted that US policy towards Lebanon was misguided. However, he claimed that Washington was not trying to take sides, but unwittingly got caught in the crossfire by trying to prop up President Amin Gemayel, the Lebanese armed forces and other vestiges of the Lebanese state. Conversation with Ambassador Richard Murphy, London, November 1995.

179. See Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage*, p. 70, and *In the Name of God*, p. 119.

180. For further details on initial US and French reaction to the bombings, see *The Financial Times*, October 24, 1983, *The International Herald Tribune*, October 24, 1983, and *Le Monde*, October 25, 1983.

181. *The Times*, October 26, 1983. According to Ambassador Richard Murphy, he later read an intelligence report pointing to Syrian-Iranian involvement in the bombing of the US Marine compound. Furthermore, the report indicated that the operation had required extensive preparations and sophistication. The bombing had been practiced and simulated in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley. Conversation with Ambassador Richard Murphy, London, November 1995.

182. *The International Herald Tribune*, October 31, 1983.

183. See BBC/SWB/ME/7473/A/3-4 October 25, 1983, *Tishrin*, October 24, 1983, and *The International Herald Tribune*, October 25, 1983.

184. *The Daily Telegraph*, October 24, 1983. Within a few hours after the explosions, the Agence France Presse bureau in Beirut received an anonymous telephone call from a man speaking on behalf of Islamic Jihad. He explained that "We are soldiers of God...we are neither Iranians, Syrians, nor Palestinians, but Muslims who follow the precepts of the Koran...We said after that [embassy bombing] that we would strike more violently still. Now they understand with what they are dealing..." See Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage*, p. 73, and *The Guardian*, October 25, 1983.

185. See *The Times*, October 26, 1983, and *The International Herald Tribune*, October 28, 1983. It is interesting to note that both buildings housing the US Marines and French paratroopers were previously occupied by the Syrians, who had detailed knowledge of their structures and layouts. Furthermore, four days after the bombings, at a meeting with the French, British and Italian foreign ministers in Paris, US Secretary of State George Shultz indicated that Washington was contemplating the provision of military equipment to Iran's main adversary, Iraq, and the bombing of Syrian strongholds in Lebanon in retaliation. See *The International Herald Tribune*, October 28 & 30,

1983.

186. Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987*, p. 275.

187. See *The International Herald Tribune*, February 1, 1984, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1983-1984*, p. 554.

188. Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987*, p. 277.

189. See Yosef Olmert, *Iranian-Syrian Relations: Between Islam and Realpolitik*, p. 181, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1983-1984*, p. 553.

190. *Ibid.*, and Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage*, p. 87.

191. Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage*, p. 87.

192. Olmert, p. 181.

193. Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage*, pp. 89-90. Since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982, a training camp situated in the outskirts of Zebdani had become the largest foreign base of operations for the Iranian revolutionaries. An old dirt road connected the town to the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. Throughout the Lebanon war, the Syrians and Iranians made extensive use of this particular route to transport men and materiel for covert operations against the Israeli and Multinational forces. During the Mountain War, the Zebdani road was used to ferry Palestinian, Iranian and Syrian forces and arms to reinforce the Druze militia. Zebdani served as the primary base of operations for the Iranians in the eastern Mediterranean. The number of Revolutionary Guards stationed there at any given time fluctuated between three and five hundred, depending on their rotation in Lebanon. See pp. 80 and 84.

194. *Ibid.*, p. 88. Western intelligence agencies claim that Abu Haidar Musawi obtained a yellow Mercedes truck similar to the ones used in the Beirut airport cargo area for the bombing of the US Marine barracks, and a red van identical to one owned by a local vegetable vendor who catered to the French paratroopers. The available evidence clearly indicates the degree of sophistication in the preparations for seemingly simple operations.

195. *The Times*, October 28, 1983, and *The Guardian*, October 29, 1983.

196. *The Financial Times*, November 2, 1983.

197. *The International Herald Tribune*, November 7, 1983.

198. *The International Herald Tribune*, November 8, 1983. Within a short time, Syria's standing army of 220,000 men was beefed up to 350,000. Also refer to *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 18, 1983.

199. BBC/SWB/ME/7493/i November 17, 1983.

200. See Seale, pp. 415-416. Apparently, some fifteen Shi'ites were shot, resulting in at least two deaths. After the incident, the prominent Shi'ite cleric, Sheikh Mohammed Mehdi Shamseddin (head of the Higher Shi'ite Council), issued a religious edict (fatwa) proclaiming armed resistance against the IDF to be a religious duty. In truth, this was tantamount to a declaration of war by the Lebanese Shi'ites. See *Middle East International*, October 28, 1983, and Robin Wright, *Sacred Rage*, pp. 93 and 222.

201. BBC/SWB/ME/7493/i November 17, 1983.

202. *The International Herald Tribune*, November 18, 1983.



203. *Middle East International*, November 25, 1983. Apparently US President Reagan had authorized retaliatory air strikes against pro-Iranian Shi'ite targets in the Bekaa. However, following consultations and deliberations with Tel Aviv and Paris, once it became clear that the Israelis and French were about to undertake similar raids, the White House dropped the plan for an American military riposte. See Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA 1981-1987*, p. 287.

204. *The International Herald Tribune*, November 18, 1983 and *Le Monde*, November 19, 1983.

205. For further details on the debate within the US administration, see *The Financial Times*, November 17, 1983, *The Financial Times*, November 23, 1983, and *The International Herald Tribune*, November 19/20, 1983.

206. *The Financial Times*, November 18, 1983, *The International Herald Tribune*, November 18, 1983, and *Le Monde*, November 19, 1983.

207. BBC/SWB/ME/7496/i November 21, 1983. On November 20, the Speaker of the Iranian parliament (Majles), Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, informed a parliamentary session that 14 Iranians were killed in the attacks. Local Lebanese sources said that at least seven Iranians were also wounded. See *The International Herald Tribune*, November 19/20, 1983.

208. *The Financial Times*, November 17, 1983, and *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 18, 1983.

209. *The Financial Times*, November 23, 1983.

210. BBC/SWB/ME/7499/A/3 November 24, 1983.

211. BBC/SWB/ME/7500/i November 25, 1983. On the same day that the delegation departed for Damascus, the Gemayel government severed diplomatic relations with Iran. The move was justified as an appropriate action in light of the Islamic Republic's refusal to withdraw the Revolutionary Guards from the Bekaa at the behest of the Lebanese government, and its continued silence regarding the nomination of a new Lebanese ambassador to Tehran. See BBC/SWB/ME/7501/A/5-6.

212. *The Financial Times*, December 7, 1983.

213. Ibid.

214. *Middle East International*, December 9, 1983.

215. Ibid.

216. For further details, see *The New York Times*, December 5, 1983, *The Financial Times*, December 7, 1983, and *The Washington Post*, December 9, 1983.

217. See *The New York Times*, December 5, 1983, and *The Financial Times*, December 7, 1983. The day after the US raids, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Morteza Sarmadi praised the "successful" Syrian military action and characterized the attack as aggression orchestrated by "imperialism and Zionism." Concurrently, an Iranian Foreign Ministry delegation headed by the Director of the Afro-Asian Department, Lavasani, left for Syria to deliver a letter from Velayati to Khaddam and discuss recent developments. See SWB/ME/7510/A/4 December 7, 1983, and SWB/ME/7511/i December 8, 1983.

218. *The Washington Post*, December 5, 1983.

219. *The Financial Times*, December 5, 1983.

220. *The New York Times*, December 5, 1983.

221. *The Washington Post*, December 11, 1983.

222. BBC/SWB/ME/7515/i December 13, 1983.

223. *The Washington Post*, December 13, 1983.

224. *The New York Times*, December 14, 1983. In an interview a week earlier, Syrian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and acting Information Minister Faruq al-Shara had adopted a similar posture by explaining that "Syria considers that the US Marines have become a party to the conflict, no matter what US officials say...The last air raid by the US Air Force against Syrian positions has increased tension in the region and constitutes a tangible proof of US involvement in Lebanon and the one-sided position taken by the marines..." On a more conciliatory note, he added that Damascus was still willing to continue the political dialogue with US special envoy Donald Rumsfeld. See *The Financial Times*, December 8, 1983.

225. Earlier, Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas had publicly announced that orders had been issued to his forces to fire on any foreign planes overflying their positions in Lebanon. *The New York Times*, December 16, 1983.

226. As the fighting raged between the Syrian Army and the US Navy, three French paratroopers were killed and three others wounded in two separate attacks on their positions. See *The New York Times*, December 16, 1983, and *The Washington Post*, December 16, 1983.

227. *The Washington Post*, December 15, 1983.

228. Edmund Ghareeb, "Iraq: Emergent Gulf Power," in Hossein Amirsadeghi ed., *The Security of the Persian Gulf* (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 219. According to former US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy, in 1980, prior to the Iraqi invasion of Iran, Baghdad had signalled its readiness to restore diplomatic relations with Washington. Conversation with Ambassador Richard Murphy, London, November 1995.

229. As mentioned in Chapter 1, there were reports in the winter of 1980 that US President Carter's National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski had made a secret visit to Iraq. *The Wall Street Journal*, February 8, 1980. In addition, secret meetings were held between US and Iraqi officials in Amman and Riyadh during the summer of 1980. In their deliberations, the Iraqis announced their intention to invade Iran in the autumn. The American representatives stated that Washington had no objections to such a course of action. See page 5 of the transcript of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) television documentary program *Frontline*, "The Arming of Saudi Arabia," aired first on US television on February 16, 1993.

230. Frederick W. Axelgard, "The United States-Iraqi Rapprochement," in *Sources of Domestic and Foreign Policy in Iraq*, ed. Z. Michael Szaz (Washington, D.C.: American Foreign Policy Research Institute, 1986), p. 50, and Alan Friedman, *Spider's Web: Bush, Saddam, Thatcher and the Decade of Deceit* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 27. Former US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy explained that Ronald Reagan despised Iran more than the Soviet Union due to the 444-day hostage crisis and Iranian-backed attacks on US diplomatic and military outposts in Lebanon. He believed that Iran was an implacable foe that had to be stopped. Consequently, the policy of tilting towards Iraq dovetailed neatly with containing Iran. Conversation with Ambassador Richard Murphy, London, November 1995.

231. *Ibid.*, p. 51. According to former US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy, Iraq constantly wanted greater US involvement in the Gulf conflict and a solid commitment to support Iraq. Conversation with Ambassador Richard Murphy, London, November 1995.

232. Axelgard, "The United States-Iraqi Rapprochement," p. 48.

233. *The Washington Post*, December 21, 1983.
234. *The International Herald Tribune*, December 20, 1983.
235. Ibid.
236. *The Financial Times*, December 20, 1983, and *The Daily Telegraph*, December 21, 1983.
237. Frederick W. Axelgard, "War and Oil: Implications for Iraq's Postwar Role in Gulf Security." in Frederick W. Axelgard ed., *Iraq in Transition: A Political, Economic, and Strategic Perspective* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1986), p. 10.
238. *The New York Times*, December 22, 1983, and *The Washington Post*, December 22, 1983.
239. *The Financial Times*, December 23, 1983.
240. *The Times*, December 23, 1983.
241. *The Washington Post*, December 28, 1983.
242. See *The Washington Post*, December 26, 1983. The turning point for American fortunes in Lebanon had been the bombing of the US embassy in Beirut by the Syrians and Iranians. The death of George Shultz's key adviser on Middle Eastern affairs, Robert Ames, during this crucial period and the destruction of the most prominent symbol and center of American representation in Lebanon dealt a severe blow to Washington's power and prestige. In the words of one observer, "suddenly you could see that the protectors of the Lebanese government could not even protect themselves." *The Financial Times*, December 5, 1983.
243. BBC/SWB/ME/7534/i January 7, 1984.
244. *The International Herald Tribune*, January 18, 1984, and BBC/SWB/ME/7544/i January 19, 1984. The kidnapping of the Saudi consul followed the signing of a major arms agreement worth \$4.1 billion between France and Saudi Arabia on January 11. The deal was interpreted by many as Riyadh's way of rewarding Paris for its steadfast support of Iraq in the Gulf War. See *Le Monde*, January 17, 1984, and *Al-Nahar Arab Report & Memo*, January 23, 1984.
245. See *The International Herald Tribune*, January 10, 1984. In early January, Kuwaiti authorities disclosed that they had substantial evidence that responsibility for the December bombings lay with Musawi's followers. They claimed that the name "Islamic Jihad" was used by several loose cells connected to Iran and Syria. According to one official, "there is no doubt in our minds that the terrorists could not have carried out the attacks without the knowledge and probable support of Iran and, to a lesser extent, Syria." *The International Herald Tribune*, January 7/8, 1984.
246. This was stated by Hezbollah leader Sheikh Fadlallah and Amal officials. Hussein Musawi confirmed the dissolution of Islamic Amal in an interview with *Al-Shiraa* magazine on November 29, 1983.
247. According to an article which appeared in *Jeune Afrique* on January 25, 1984, the logistics for Musawi's men were provided by Syria. In addition to providing arms, supplies and financial support, Syrian army officers under the command of Rifat Assad were responsible for training the recruits and familiarizing them with unconventional warfare in camps located in the Bekaa. Also see *Le Monde*, January 21, 1984.
248. *The International Herald Tribune*, January 23, 1984.
249. Ibid. Suggestions by George Shultz that pre-emptive strikes might be carried out in Lebanon against terrorist strongholds prompted Iranian President Khamene'i and Speaker of Parliament

Rafsanjani to caution the US against new adventurism in the region. That same week, the Reagan administration put Iran on the list of states sponsoring terrorism. Countries such as Syria, Libya, South Yemen and Cuba were already designated as sponsors of terrorism. See *The International Herald Tribune*, January 24, 1984.

250. *Middle East International*, January 27, 1984.

251. One of Assad's serious miscalculations in the winter of 1983-84 was his clumsy attempt to crush the PLO stronghold in the Lebanese port city of Tripoli in an effort to rein in Yasser Arafat and prevent him from joining an American-led peace initiative, in conjunction with Jordan's King Hussein. His decision to lay siege to Arafat's last remaining base alienated many of his previous allies in the Steadfastness Front, who sided with the PLO. These included Algeria, South Yemen and, to a lesser extent, Libya; only Tehran stood by Damascus. The Tripoli affair proved to be a major blunder which contributed to the steady marginalization of Syria in mainstream Arab politics by early 1984. Although its immediate impact was to strengthen the Syrian-Iranian partnership, Syria's power was diminished in the long run. See *Middle East International*, January 27, 1984, and *The Financial Times*, February 17, 1984.

252. BBC/SWB/ME/7551/i January 27, 1984, and BBC/SWB/ME/7554/A/2 January 31, 1984.

253. BBC/SWB/ME/7554/A/2 January 31, 1984.

254. *The Financial Times*, February 7, 1984.

255. *The International Herald Tribune*, February 6, 1984, and Avi-Ran. pp. 169-170.

256. *The International Herald Tribune*, February 9, 1984, and Avi-Ran, p. 170. Approximately 58% of the Lebanese Army was composed of Muslim soldiers (27% of them Shi'ites), while another 800 to 1,500 were Druze. Once the fighting had subsided, only 12-13 thousand troops remained loyal to the central government, of whom just 6,000 were considered combat-ready. See *The International Herald Tribune*, February 22, 1984.

257. *The Financial Times*, February 8, 1984.

258. Ibid.

259. *The Guardian*, February 13, 1984. These remarks were made by the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Faruq al-Shara, and the Head of the Syrian Ba'th's Foreign Bureau, Mohammed Haydar.

260. See *The Financial Times*, February 17, 1984, and *The International Herald Tribune*, February 17, 1984.

261. BBC/SWB/ME/7564/A/5 February 11, 1984.

262. BBC/SWB/ME/7572/A/6 February 21, 1984. Jumblatt had also initially rejected the Saudi plan and called for Gemayel's ouster.

263. Avi-Ran, pp. 170-171, *The Financial Times*, March 6, 1984, and *The Times*, March 6, 1984.

264. BBC/SWB/ME/7585/A/5 March 7, 1984.

265. Avi-Ran, p. 171.

266. *Al-Ba'th*, March 6, 1984.

267. BBC/SWB/ME/7390/A/11 July 20, 1983.

268. For details, see Anthony H. Cordesman & Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War: The Iran-Iraq War*, pp. 166-170. After the fighting had died down in the Gulf, as Syria and its allies finished preparations to retake the Shouf mountains and lay siege to the PLO stronghold in Tripoli, Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati flew to Damascus, where he was received by Assad, and also held meetings with dissident Fatah leaders (Nimr Salih and Samih Quwayq) opposed to Yasser Arafat. BBC/SWB/ME/7423/i August 27, 1983.

269. On October 9, Paris radio announced that the aircraft had left the French naval air base at Landvisian two days earlier. A month later, on November 7, French Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson informed the Senate that the Super Etendards had arrived in Iraq on October 8. See BBC/SWB/ME/7460/i October 10, 1983, and BBC/SWB/ME/7487/A/11 November 10, 1983.

270. BBC/SWB/ME/7487/A/11 November 10, 1983.

271. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1983-84*, p. 131. It is interesting to note that on February 8, 1984, the UAE ambassador to France, Khalifa al-Mubarak, was assassinated in Paris by a previously unknown group calling itself the Arab Revolutionary Brigades. BBC/SWB/ME/7563/i February 10, 1984.

272. As many as 20 thousand were killed, and another 20 to 30 thousand wounded and captured. Iraqi losses consisted of some 6 thousand dead, and ten to twelve thousand wounded. See O'Ballance, p. 147, and Cordesman & Wagner, p. 183. According to the Iraqi daily, *Al-Thawrah*, on March 1, Iraqi forces captured weapons from the Iranians built in the Syrian war industry factories. The arms were marked with the acronym Jim Ayn Sin which stands for Jumhuriya al-Arabiya al-Suriya (Syrian Arab Republic). The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) listed in its 1984 yearbook, *World Armaments and Disarmament*, that Syria continued to be a major supplier of arms to the Islamic Republic. Also see *The Times*, April 7, 1984.

273. The Majnoon Islands contained some 7 billion barrels of oil, which translated into roughly a quarter of Iraq's proven oil reserves. Their capture allowed Rafsanjani to boast shortly after Operation Kheiber that "we have now more than enough in terms of proven oil reserves to take care of the cost of reparations for the enormous damages we have suffered at the hands of the enemy." *Le Monde*, March 30, 1984.

274. O'Ballance, p. 148.

275. Cordesman & Wagner, p. 191.

276. See BBC/SWB/ME/7587/A/7 March 9, 1984, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1983-84*, p. 133.

277. *Al-Thawrah*, March 13, 1984.

278. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1983-84*, p. 133.

279. BBC/SWB/ME/7594/i March 17, 1984.

280. *Middle East International*, April 6, 1984.

281. *The Financial Times*, April 24, 1984.

282. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 18, 1984. Despite the Kremlin's displeasure with Syria's intractable stance on thawing relations with Iraq, it was unwilling to jeopardize its relationship with its most valuable Middle East ally just because of this issue. From Moscow's perspective, with the Cold War once again in full swing, the Soviet-Syrian friendship had proven to be quite beneficial in its global rivalry with Washington. With Soviet aid, Assad had succeeded in dealing the first American foreign policy defeat since Ronald Reagan assumed office in January 1981. By the end of February

1984, Syria's "Sword and Shield" strategy had driven the United States out of Lebanon, having wrested it out of the US-Israeli sphere of influence with the scrapping of the American-sponsored Israeli-Lebanese agreement of May 17, 1983. See Karsh, *Soviet Policy Towards Syria Since 1970*, pp. 155-156.

283. *Ibid.*, and Cordesman & Wagner, p. 194.

284. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 18, 1984. Under the terms of the Syrian-Iranian oil deal, Damascus saved \$365 million annually. Iranian oil accounted for 70% of the oil refined in the Horns and Baniyas facilities.

285. BBC/SWB/ME/7602/A/5-6 March 27, 1984.

286. BBC/SWB/ME/7603/A/3 March 28, 1984.

287. BBC/SWB/ME/7618/A/4 April 14, 1984.

288. See *Al-Ba'th*, April 4, 1984.

289. *Middle East International*, February 10, 1984.

290. There was a noticeable upsurge in guerrilla activity in southern Lebanon. By the middle of May, Israeli casualties totalled more than 2,700 since the beginning of the Lebanon War. Between March and May, there were over 120 attacks, primarily carried out by Shi'ite militiamen. See *Middle East International*, May 18, 1984.

291. BBC/SWB/ME/7629/A/3-4 April 28, 1984.

292. O'Ballance, p. 155, and Cordesman & Wagner, pp. 191-194.

293. BBC/SWB/ME/7637/A/7-8 May 8, 1984. Also see Rafsanjani's comments on Saudi-Iraqi collaboration after an SDC meeting in BBC/SWB/ME/7645/A/4 May 17, 1984.

294. BBC/SWB/ME/7647/i May 19, 1984.

295. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1983-84*, p. 134. For full text of the resolution see BBC/SWB/ME/7648/A/8 May 21, 1984.

296. See *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1983-84*, p. 134, and *The Middle East*, June 1984. In response to the resolution passed at the Tunis conference, the Iranian foreign ministry issued a statement asserting that "the Islamic Republic of Iran considers itself dutybound to announce, once again, that it will make every effort to maintain security and stability in the Persian Gulf...[however], if the Islamic Republic of Iran is deprived of the possibility of exporting its oil, then no oil will be exported from the region." BBC/SWB/ME/7650/A/7 May 23, 1984.

297. *Le Monde*, May 24, 1984, and *The Financial Times*, May 24, 1984.

298. BBC/SWB/ME/7652/A/1 May 25, 1984.

299. BBC/SWB/ME/7652/A/3 May 25, 1984. The bill permitted the Oil Ministry to sell 5 million tons of crude oil for a twelve-month period at a \$2.50 discount and deliver an additional one million tons free of charge. With regard to the rescheduling of Syrian debts, the bill specified that monthly installments of \$20 million had to be made, starting in May 1985, for four years. Afterwards twelve quarterly installments would follow to pay off the remaining \$500 million owed by Syria. See *The Financial Times*, May 24, 1984, and *Le Monde*, May 25, 1984.

300. BBC/SWB/ME/7652/A/3 May 25, 1984.

301. BBC/SWB/ME/7653/A/5-6 May 26, 1984.
302. BBC/SWB/ME/7653/A/7-8 May 26, 1984.
303. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 24, 1984, and *The Times*, May 24, 1984.
304. *The Financial Times*, May 25, 1984.
305. Earlier, on May 12, the pro-Iraqi Paris-based magazine, *Al-Watan al-Arabi*, published a report on Syrian military transport planes delivering weapons and war materiel to an Iranian military airbase near Tabriz. In addition, according to the magazine, Syrian military personnel had established an operational base in Tabriz on Dr. Ali Shariati Street.
306. According to various reports, Iranian oil exports plunged from a daily average of 1.75 million barrels per day (b/d) to as low as 500,000 or 700,000 b/d in the spring. See *The Middle East*, July 1984, and BBC/SWB/ME/7659/A/6 June 2, 1984.
307. See Khaddam's interview with *Al-Nahar al-Arabi wa al-Dawli* on June 2. It is highly unlikely that the Syrians were serious about possibly intervening in the Gulf against the Islamic Republic. They were well aware of Iranian concerns about sliding into greater regional isolation and driving even more Arab states behind the Iraqis. The statements made by Khaddam and other Syrian officials at the time were partially intended to pay lip service to the pan-Arab cause and deflect criticism from their detractors.
308. BBC/SWB/ME/7665/A/7 June 9, 1984. Afterwards, Iranian warplanes concentrated their attacks on shipping in international waters in the southern parts of the Gulf; no more incursions were made into Saudi territorial waters.
309. See BBC/SWB/ME/7679/A/14-15 June 26, 1984, and BBC/SWB/ME/7687/A/6 July 5, 1984. In fact, as early as the beginning of 1984, the US covertly sent shipments of chemical weapons to Iraq, via a third country in Europe, taking great care to ensure that the deliveries could not be traced back to the United States. Confidential conversation with a US Department of Commerce official. Washington, D.C., September 1993. Furthermore, in early July, a Congressional delegation led by Senator Bannerman of the Foreign Relations Committee visited Baghdad and held talks with Iraqi officials on issues of mutual interest. BBC/SWB/ME/7690/A/9 July 9, 1984.
310. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 25, 1984, and *Al-Watan Al-Arabi*, July 7, 1984.
311. In mid-August, elements of the Syrian Eleventh Armored Brigade commanded by Brigadier Hikmat Ibrahim entered Ba'albek and reassumed control of the city, in what turned out to be a peaceful transfer of power. The Syrians deployed their units throughout the former Iranian stronghold and politely instructed the Iranian Revolutionary Guards at various checkpoints to relinquish control to them. With the Lebanese government once again in the Syrian sphere of influence, and the IDF on the defensive in the south, Damascus calculated that the opportune moment had arrived to reassert control over the hotbed of Iran's Islamic revolutionary ferment in Lebanon. A smooth transition under the guidance of the imperturbable Brigadier Ibrahim was judged to be prudent in order to avoid straining relations with Iran and alienating local Shi'ites with pro-Iranian sympathies. *The Times*, August 15, 1984.
312. *The Financial Times*, June 20, 1984.
313. In August, US Congressman Stephen Solarz, an influential member of the House Foreign Relations Committee, visited Baghdad.
314. See *The Financial Times*, August 25, 1984, *The International Herald Tribune*, August 25/26, 1984, and *Le Monde*, August 26/27, 1984.

315. At least one Iranian pilgrim was killed in the melee. Acting Iranian Foreign Minister Besharati and Director of Arab and African Affairs Lavasani summoned the Saudi chargé d'affaires to the Foreign Ministry and lodged an official protest, severely berating the Saudi authorities for their handling of the affair. BBC/SWB/ME/7737/A/10 September 1, 1984, and BBC/SWB/ME/7750/A/1-2 September 17, 1984.
316. BBC/SWB/ME/7743/i September 8, 1984.
317. *The International Herald Tribune*, September 21, 1984.
318. *Le Monde*, September 22, 1984.
319. *The International Herald Tribune*, October 15, 1984.
320. *The International Herald Tribune*, October 19, 1984.
321. *Le Monde*, October 11, 1984.
322. BBC/SWB/ME/7773/A/5 October 13, 1984.
323. *The International Herald Tribune*, October 14, 1984.
324. BBC/SWB/ME/7768/A/6 October 8, 1984.
325. Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, pp. 81-82, and *Soviet Policy Towards Syria Since 1970*, pp. 157-158.
326. Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, pp. 82-83, and *Soviet Policy Towards Syrian Since 1970*, pp. 159-160.
327. BBC/SWB/ME/7785/A/10 October 27, 1984.
328. See *Le Monde*, October 19, 1984.
329. BBC/SWB/ME/7778/A/9 October 19, 1984. The Mirage F-1 EQ5 had the capability to carry a full bombload and launch Exocet AM-39 missiles.
330. *The International Herald Tribune*, November 21, 1984.
331. For details on the growing stature of Hezbollah, and the waning influence of Amal, see the article by Robin Wright in *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 19, 1984.
332. BBC/SWB/ME/7805/A/2 November 20, 1984.
333. *The International Herald Tribune*, November 21, 1984.
334. For the text of the interview broadcast on Radio France Inter, see BBC/SWB/ME/7805/A/7-11 November 20, 1984.
335. BBC/SWB/ME/7812/i November 28, 1984.
336. BBC/SWB/ME/7813/A/6 November 29, 1984
337. According to Efraim Karsh, "given that some eight years earlier, in June 1976, during the height of the Soviet-Syrian confrontation over Lebanon, Assad had journeyed to Paris for the first time in his presidency, the Syrian message to Moscow was unmistakable." See Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, p. 84.



338. According to former US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy, Tareq Aziz and Iraq's ambassador to Washington, Nizar Hamdoon, were shrewd statesmen and succeeded in convincing US officials that Iraq had become more moderate and changed its foreign policy orientation. They claimed that Washington could rely on Baghdad as a dependable partner in regional affairs and Gulf security. Conversation with Ambassador Richard Murphy, London, November 1985.

339. Iranian exports fell to about 1 million b/d. With foreign tankers unwilling to run the gauntlet to Kharg Island, Tehran responded by using a limited number of its own small tankers to transship the oil south to Sirri and Lavan islands, which possessed a transit loading capacity of 700,000 b/d in aggregate. *Middle East International*, February 8, 1985.

340. The plan called for a three-phased withdrawal of the IDF from the Awali river to just north of the Litani-Nabatiya area (in the process abandoning Sidon) by February 18; followed by a withdrawal from the Christian stronghold in the east (including the town of Jezzine) to the Hasbayya area, and in the final phase a complete withdrawal from the Shi'ite south to the international border by July 1985. See *Middle East International*, January 25, 1985. It is interesting to note that, following the Israeli government decision, in an interview on Shi'ite terrorism, Israeli Chief of Staff Lieutenant-General Moshe Levi admitted: "The Shi'ite community has undergone processes - some of which ran parallel to the war...the most prominent of which is so-called Khomeinism which originates in Iran...It is my assessment that through our continued presence in Lebanon we give the Shi'ites more reasons to go on attacking us." BBC/SWB/ME/7851/A/1-4 January 17, 1985.

341. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1984-85*, pp. 119-120, and *Middle East International*, February 8, 1985. Apparently, the Kuwaitis pleaded with the Syrians to discontinue arms shipments to Iran, but this was to no avail.

342. BBC/SWB/ME/7871/A/3 February 9, 1985, and *Le Monde*, February 9, 1985.

343. *The Financial Times*, February 13, 1985, and *Middle East International*, March 8, 1985.

344. *The International Herald Tribune*, January 22, 1985.

## **INTRA-ALLIANCE TENSIONS AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE SYRIAN-IRANIAN AXIS: THE REVERSAL OF FORTUNES 1985-1988**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The period between the spring of 1985 and the summer of 1988 was the most turbulent and problematic in the evolution of the Syrian-Iranian alliance. In almost every respect, clashes of interest and disagreements arose in areas where the two states had previously cooperated. In the Persian Gulf region, the continuation of hostilities between Iran and Iraq and the gradual internationalization of the conflict, whereby Tehran continued to attack shipping bound for the Gulf Arab states (in reprisal for Iraqi raids), put Syria in an increasingly awkward position. Moreover, when Iran achieved its most significant military breakthrough (since the expulsion of the Iraqi forces from Iran in May 1982) by capturing the strategically-located Faw Peninsula in February 1986, Syria was at pains to justify its continued support for a non-Arab state which was now occupying a sizeable amount of Arab territory. In the Levant, with the completion of the three-phased Israeli withdrawal from most of occupied Lebanon to the self-declared "security zone" in June 1985, Tehran and Damascus developed conflicting agendas in that war-torn country. With the gradual ascent of Hezbollah as a formidable political force (among Lebanon's largest minority - the Shi'ites) at the expense of the pro-Syrian Amal movement, the two sides found themselves increasingly at odds over the political future of Lebanon. While the pro-Iranian Hezbollah movement espoused the establishment of an Islamic republic in Syria's backyard, Amal envisioned a secular state within Syria's sphere of influence.

Besides their divergent positions on the most appropriate course of action in these two arenas of conflict, Iraq's ability to wage an intensive bombing campaign against Iran's oil facilities starting in August 1985, coupled with the oil price crash of March 1986, resulted in Tehran's oil revenues being cut by almost 70% within a matter of a few months, thereby adding to its economic woes and further complicating bilateral relations with Syria. Iran's refusal to meet Syria's oil requirements, along with the latter's failure to pay off its oil debts, strained the already troubled relationship. The Iranian leadership was also greatly alarmed by the growing rapprochement between Syria and Jordan in early 1986 and King Hussein's subsequent efforts to resolve the differences between Hafez Assad and Saddam Hussein. Jordan's diplomacy received the blessing of other Arab states eager to decouple Syria and Iran, mend fences between the two Ba'thi regimes and force Iran to accept a ceasefire. These moves were backed by not only Riyadh and Washington, but also by Syria's Superpower patron, the Soviet Union.

Throughout the three-year period between 1985 and 1988, enormous effort was exerted, and financial and material benefits were offered by both Arab states and the Soviet Union to entice Assad to abandon his friendship with Iran. Coupled with the fact that Syrian-Iranian relations reached a nadir in 1986-1987, one could argue that Assad had strong incentives at the time to

abandon his alliance with Khomeini's Iran in order to improve his overall position, since he was facing several important challenges simultaneously. These included:

- a) the need to secure Syria's eastern flank with Iraq in view of the prospect of a conflict with Israel;
- b) Syria's marginalization in Arab politics with the consolidation of the Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi axis;
- c) the marked deterioration of relations with the West and the international opprobrium brought by Syria's alleged involvement in the Hindawi affair;
- d) Iranian activism and interference in Lebanon;
- e) Hezbollah's rise as a dominant force in Lebanese affairs at the expense of Amal;
- f) growing Arab-Iranian polarization due to the continuation of the Gulf war;
- g) Iran's refusal to continue oil deliveries to Syria;
- h) the dismal state of the Syrian economy; and
- i) the gradual cooling of Soviet-Syrian relations during the Gorbachev era, and the subsequent abandonment of the quest for "strategic parity" with Israel.

Many observers were baffled why Assad did not distance himself from Iran and join the mainstream of Arab politics, in order to minimize the risk of conflict with Israel and the West and derive substantial benefits, including oil and financial rewards, from the pro-Iraqi camp. Indeed, Syria came under considerable pressure from the Soviet Union, Saudi Arabia and Jordan to sever its links with Iran and mend fences with Iraq. Such a move could have mitigated its security dilemma with Israel, improved its regional and international standing and ensured the flow of economic and financial aid to remedy the dire domestic economic situation.

Overall the evolution of bilateral ties between Syria and Iran during this critical period clearly demonstrates the flawed conclusions of those analysts who argued that the alliance was a marriage of convenience - a short-term tactical move between two regimes with disparate ideologies and objectives. It also exposes the limits of the realist school of thought in explaining the behavior of these two states. If immediate security concerns and material aggrandizement had been the driving forces in their foreign policies, particular in the case of Syria, the relationship would have collapsed. However, both parties had broader, long-term strategic concerns derived from their own national security priorities and based on their respective ideologies and worldviews, whereby they perceived a unique role for themselves in the region and greater utility in preserving the alliance, in order to pursue an independent foreign policy shaping events in the Middle East in a desirable manner in the long-term and minimizing foreign influence and penetration of the region.

The aim of this chapter is to explain the sequence of events and put forth a comprehensive analysis of the conflicting policies pursued initially between 1985 and 1987 by Damascus and Tehran in the Persian Gulf region and the Levant, within the broader context of the rapidly changing regional and international environment. In order to meet emerging challenges by trying to address their most immediate security concerns and concomitantly balance them with their

respective long-term strategic interests and ideological aspirations, the two sides were forced to reassess their priorities, delineate the extent of their influence and activities in the other partner's backyard and fine-tune the working mechanisms of the alliance, in order to determine properly the parameters of cooperation and unilateral action without impinging on the primary interests of their partner. Consequently, the alliance partners had to formulate a new rationale for their relationship and redefine their goals and functions. Furthermore, their ability to engage in constant dialogue and bilateral consultations, avoid losing sight of long-term strategic interests and modify their ideological principles resulted in new foundations being laid for continued cooperation between the two parties and, moreover, the eventual consolidation and institutionalization of the Damascus-Tehran axis. Consequently, by 1987-88, despite the facts that Amal-Hezbollah rivalry in Lebanon was intensifying, Mikhail Gorbachev was radically transforming Soviet Mideast policy by distancing himself from Hafez Assad, the United States was intervening in the Persian Gulf War as a de facto co-belligerent on the side of Baghdad and Iraq was finally seizing the initiative and turning the tide of the war, the Syrian-Iranian alliance itself was maturing into a stable and durable working relationship.

#### **THE SYRIAN-IRANIAN RESPONSE TO THE "PAN-ARABIZATION" OF THE GULF WAR**

Following Iran's disastrous defeat in Operation Badr and the tripartite summit between Saddam Hussein, King Hussein and Hosni Mubarak in Baghdad, Syria and Iran quickly scrambled to engage in a damage-control operation aimed at bolstering their respective positions. This effort was given further impetus when the GCC Council of Ministers met in Riyadh between March 17 and 19 and at the end of its deliberations issued a statement affirming its support for Iraq's position in the conflict.<sup>1</sup> Both Damascus and Tehran adopted a two-pronged strategy to shore up support among regional states and advance their own political agenda. For Syria, this entailed rallying the rejectionist states behind its position and attempting to dispel the argument of the pro-Iraqi camp that the Gulf war had now been transformed into a truly Arab-Persian conflict. Revolutionary Iran also pursued a similar two-track policy of trying to maintain the sympathy and support of the Steadfastness Front and allay the fears of the GCC states that Iran was bent on exporting its revolution to neighboring countries and had designs on Arab territory.

In order to counter the impact of the tripartite summit, and also demonstrate their continued displeasure with the Jordanian-PLO peace initiative, the Syrians convened a meeting of senior officials from the Steadfastness Front and Iran in Damascus in the days that followed. Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati was also dispatched to Algiers and Tripoli to confer with the Algerian and Libyan leadership on the latest developments; he then proceeded to Damascus, where he delivered a message from President Khamene'i to Hafez Assad prior to the opening of the talks in Damascus.<sup>2</sup> Velayati also met with his Syrian, Algerian and South Yemeni counterparts and Libya's Major Jallud during a two-day period. The consultations ended on 21 March with a

quadripartite meeting of Syrian, Algerian, Libyan and South Yemeni representatives to coordinate their policies and "confront the deviationist and capitulationist line being peddled by imperialist and Zionist forces."<sup>3</sup>

Overall, the fact that the main rejectionist states gathered in Damascus for consultations enabled Syria to uphold its pan-Arab credentials and partially offset the symbolic effect of the tripartite summit in Baghdad. On the other hand, the Steadfastness Front was in a moribund state and by now served as nothing more than a talking shop. In sharp contrast to the active military support provided by Jordan and Egypt to Iraq, the Syrians were well aware that, in the event of a conflict with Israel, there was very little that its Arab allies could do to assist it. Moreover, Damascus failed to forge a consensus among the members to schedule a meeting of their respective heads of state in order to formally revive the Steadfastness Front.<sup>4</sup> Revolutionary Iran, for its part, was appreciative of Syria's efforts to associate it with the Arab rejectionist bloc and the continued willingness of Syria and Libya to provide it with long-range surface-to-surface missiles for use against Iraq in the ongoing "War of the Cities."<sup>5</sup>

During the last week of March, at the Arab League Council meeting held in Tunis, Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara reiterated his country's commitment to safeguarding pan-Arab interests and justified the liaison with non-Arab Iran in terms of guaranteeing the security of the Arab East. He elucidated:

"Syria has at least tried to prevent an expansion of the war to include other Arab states, because we have seen and felt the real dangers of the war becoming an Arab-Persian war - a war that could threaten the national interests of all Arab states and constitute a threat to the security and stability of the region...Our continuous contacts with Iran have resulted in the Iranian government's commitment, despite what has happened, not to entertain any expansionist designs on any Arab territory, whether in Iraq or any of the Gulf states. All these efforts are a source of pride to us in Syria and should be a source of pride for the Arab nation. This is because they stem from pan-Arab stands that are aimed at safeguarding the nation's rights and interests."<sup>6</sup>

At the conclusion of the meeting, on March 28, a mild statement was issued reiterating the solidarity of Arab League members with Iraq in defense of its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. It also called for an immediate end to the hostilities and a negotiated settlement to bring a just and honorable peace. There was no explicit condemnation of Iran's intractable stance.<sup>7</sup>

The Iranian leadership became increasingly conscious that its determination to prosecute the war until the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and its ideological imperative to unite Arabs and Iranians under the banner of revolutionary Islam were perceived to be contradictory by many Arabs. The pro-Iraqi camp was able to exploit growing public disillusionment with Iran by

portraying the Gulf War as a continuation of the age-old Arab-Persian rivalry and depicting Iran's ayatollahs as no more than "turbaned shahs" bent on imposing Persian dominance on the Arabs under the guise of political Islam. For the Iranian regime, the conflicting currents in its conduct of the war and appeal for Arab popular support represented a major dilemma. On the one hand, the general aim to ensure the country's future security by defeating the Iraqi military machine and toppling the Iraqi Ba'th had become inextricably linked with the broader revolutionary goal of setting up an Islamic republic in Iraq and creating a "Shi'ite axis" from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, prolongation of the conflict was prompting an increasing number of Arab states to join the pro-Iraqi camp or at the very least tilt towards Baghdad, thereby resulting in Iran's growing isolation and putting its few remaining allies - Syria and Libya - in an awkward position.

The gradual marginalization of Iran in the Arab-Islamic world transformed the Arab-Israeli theater, particularly Lebanon, from the vantage point of Tehran's revolutionaries, into a vital arena to demonstrate their commitment to "the pan-Islamic struggle against the Zionist entity" and prevent an Arab-Persian schism. Furthermore, the bridgehead in the East Mediterranean was essential in order to support Lebanese Shi'ite co-religionists, strive for unity among Lebanon's Shi'ites and Sunnis and serve as a defender of Palestinian rights within the country. It is noteworthy that, because of Tehran's determination to maintain its position as one of the key players in Assad's backyard, its growing reliance on Syria and Libya for certain weapons systems and its aim to preserve its links with the two main Arab rejectionist states in order to prove its pro-Arab stance, the Iranian-Syrian nexus became an asymmetrical alliance, whereby Iran was more dependent on Syrian goodwill.<sup>9</sup>

While Iran's opponents tried to depict the war as a struggle between the "defender of the Arab East" and the traditional Persian foe, Iranian leaders tried to transcend the nationalist debate and elevate the nature of the conflict to a higher plain, to one of progressive, revolutionary forces fighting reactionary nationalists who served foreign masters. In a telling speech by Majles Speaker Rafsanjani to a group of visiting theologians from Islamic countries on May 4, he declared:

"We consider the Arabic language as one of the noblest in the world and believe that Arabic literature is a divine blessing bestowed upon humanity by the Almighty.

It is the language of the Quran, the Prophet, the imams, as well as our religion and history. Our glories in the libraries are all in Arabic...Our prayers and more than half of the vocabulary in our literature are in Arabic. So you see that there is no anti-Arab sentiment in the Islamic Republic. On the contrary, we hold a pro-Arab bias...Nevertheless, the enemies of Islam are raising the issue of the Arabs and non-Arabs. Fortunately, such Arab countries as Libya and Syria which are alongside us, have thwarted this propaganda of the enemies. If this issue existed at all, Syria and Libya would not side with us...You and us in Iran must be

examples of cooperation between Arabs and non-Arabs, a model of Shi'ite-Sunni unity, and present a prominent example of Muslim unity...If we succeed in keeping ablaze this sacred flame lit by the Islamic revolution in Iran and spread it elsewhere, then there could be hopes for the salvation of the people and the oppressed."<sup>10</sup>

As Iran's staunchest supporters, the Syrians were well aware of the growing disenchantment in the Arab world with Tehran's conduct in the Gulf region, the widening rift between Iran and the GCC states as the war against Iraq dragged on and increased chances of the hostilities spilling over to engulf the southern littoral states. In the weeks following Operation Badr, Syria engaged in quiet diplomacy in a bid to ease tensions between the GCC and Iran. Damascus focused its efforts on trying to thaw Saudi-Iranian relations. It soon became apparent that both Riyadh and Tehran were receptive to the Syrian initiative.

#### **FALSE DAWN: RECONCILIATION ATTEMPTS BETWEEN IRAN AND THE GCC STATES**

In order to reverse the deterioration of Arab-Iranian relations and dent the unity of the pro-Iraqi camp, Tehran went along with Damascus' strategy and also decided to embark on its own "charm offensive" to allay the fears of the Gulf Arabs and mend fences to the extent possible. Although the Iranians had no intention of easing the pressure on Ba'thi Iraq, they hoped to persuade its financial backers to adopt a more balanced posture in the war. The Syrian effort bore fruit, with both sides sending positive signals. The ensuing flurry of diplomatic activity led to a series of bilateral exchanges between Iran and the Gulf sheikhdoms.<sup>11</sup> The most notable achievement was the invitation extended by Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati to his Saudi counterpart, Prince Saud al-Faisal, and the latter's subsequent three-day visit to Tehran in mid-May. Besides two rounds of talks with Velayati, Prince Saud also met with President Khamene'i, Prime Minister Musavi and Majles Speaker Rafsanjani. Despite their conflicting positions on the Gulf war, both sides seem to have concurred on the need to prevent the expansion of the conflict and strengthen bilateral cooperation. On the issue of the Hajj, Tehran promised to refrain from instigating any provocative acts during the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and, in return, Riyadh agreed to provide regular shipments of refined petroleum products to Iran for domestic use.<sup>12</sup> Following the successful outcome of the visit, Iran decided to build on the momentum which had been achieved in thawing Saudi-Iranian relations by bridging differences with other Gulf countries. A delegation headed by Velayati's advisor, Ali Shams-Ardakani, toured the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to reassure their governments of Iranian intentions in the war. The GCC states which were keenly aware of Iran's attempts to reverse its increasing unpopularity in the Arab world, the stalemate in the land war and Iraq's growing assertiveness in the air campaign, concluded that the most effective manner to deal with Tehran in order to prevent the Gulf War from spilling over and attempt to modify Iranian war aims was to engage it in an intensive dialog. The long-term rationale

for this approach was to prevent the alienation of Iran from its Arab neighbors, provide it with a stake in normalization of relations and, in view of the deadlock in the ground war, persuade it to accept a negotiated settlement.

Concomitant with their efforts to initiate a constructive dialog with the Islamic Republic, throughout 1985, the Arab sheikhdoms and other members of the pro-Iraqi camp sought to win over Iran's primary Arab backer, Syria, by trying as a first step to reconcile its differences with Jordan and Iraq. Although their efforts bore fruit as the year progressed, the situation initially became somewhat convoluted as a result of greater inter-Arab polarization and developments in the Gulf War which seemed to complicate further the overall equation.

### **THE INTER-ARAB RIFT, SYRIAN POLICY AND THE CASABLANCA SUMMIT**

During the summer of 1985, the rift between the moderate Arab states and the radical bloc grew wider, as the two sides jockeyed for power and influence in the region and tried to discredit each other. Two diametrically opposed positions crystallized on the Arab-Israeli question and Gulf War. Jordan and Egypt spearheaded the movement to resuscitate an Arab-Israeli dialog in order to resolve the conflict through peaceful means and advocated pan-Arab support for Iraq, denouncing the pro-Iranian Arab camp for betraying the greater interests of the Arab nation. Syria and Libya tried to impede their moves at every opportunity and, in parallel with Iranian initiatives, engaged in some diplomatic maneuvering to strengthen the rejectionist camp and minimize the perception of any Arab-Iranian rift. Besides political posturing, both camps intensified their propaganda wars against one another.

Syria's and Iran's prestige and power were enhanced in June by their involvement in the peaceful resolution of the TWA 847 hijacking in Beirut. The two played a pivotal role in convincing the hijackers to release the remaining passengers. Besides helping them to some degree shed their unpopular image in the West, their part in ending the TWA 847 affair led to a reassessment of US policy towards the two countries, particularly Iran.<sup>13</sup> (See section on hijacking.)

### **Syria's Growing Power and Influence in the Middle East**

While Syria's role in the resolution of the TWA hijacking restored some of its credibility internationally and boosted its prestige in the region, its Arab adversaries reacted sharply by intensifying their propaganda campaign to portray the Assad regime as a sponsor of terrorism and betrayer of the Arab cause. Jordan, Egypt and Iraq escalated their war of words to diminish Syria's stature and influence in the region. The Jordanians in particular were convinced that Syria was behind the numerous attacks on their foreign representations, including diplomatic outposts and airline offices abroad, in the months following the joint Jordanian-PLO Declaration of Principles (February 1985). Jordanian authorities accused Syria of orchestrating a massive effort aimed at destabilizing the Hashemite kingdom.<sup>14</sup>



In the aftermath of the completion of the third phase of the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon and the peaceful resolution of the TWA hijacking, Syrian power and prestige seemed to be at its pinnacle. Coupled with its unswerving support for the Iranian war effort and incessant efforts to derail the PLO-Jordanian peace initiative, Damascus' notable gains alarmed the moderate Arab states. In view of these developments, an unscheduled meeting between King Hussein and President Mubarak took place in the Jordanian city of Aqaba on July 4 to discuss ways to counter Syria's growing power. Besides Damascus' potential for filling the power vacuum left by Israel in Lebanon, the two Arab leaders were fearful that Assad might have exacted a price from the Reagan administration for Syria's role in ending the TWA incident, possibly relating to the Arab-Israeli peace process.<sup>15</sup> The Egyptian position towards Syria and its other regional rivals was clearly articulated in an interview with Egyptian Prime Minister Kamal Hassan Ali, published in *Al-Watan Al-Arabi* on July 19, in which he openly accused Damascus and Tripoli of involvement in terrorist acts and described the Syrian-Libyan-Iranian camp as an obstacle to Arab solidarity and baneful to Arab interests. The Jordanian news media were also full of reports alleging Syrian involvement in terrorism in Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait and the Gulf region, underscoring Assad's treachery by aiding the aggressive Iranian war effort "to kill the Iraqi people."<sup>16</sup> Syria's growing assertiveness was also manifested in a number of incidents in mid-July, when its warplanes crossed into Iraqi airspace in a show of force to intimidate its Ba'thi rival.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time as maintaining the Syrian-Iranian pincer against Iraq, Tehran continued its policy to forge new links with the Gulf Arabs and drive a wedge between them and Iraq. In late July, a high-level Iranian political-cum-oil delegation arrived in Riyadh to coordinate policy on OPEC affairs with the Saudis in order to ensure price stability on the international oil market. The Iranian representatives held talks with Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal and also submitted a message from Ali Akbar Velayati.<sup>18</sup>

As divisions in the Arab world were exacerbated by the Gulf War and the Arafat-Hussein initiative, King Hassan II of Morocco announced his intention on July 27 to host an emergency Arab summit in Casablanca to clear the air and restore some semblance of unity among Arab ranks.<sup>19</sup> The meeting, the first of its kind in three years, scheduled to commence on August 7, was intended to discuss all aspects of the Palestinian question, including giving King Hussein and Yasser Arafat the opportunity to explain how closely their blueprint conformed to the Fez peace plan of September 1982.<sup>20</sup> While Iraq and the UAE immediately backed the move, Syria was vocal in its protestations, denouncing the scheduled summit as a "shameful scheme" which threatened the future of the Arab nation.<sup>21</sup> Interpreting the event as a vehicle to advance the Jordanian-PLO agenda, Damascus immediately signalled its intention to boycott the meeting.<sup>22</sup> Syria's traditional allies - Libya, Algeria, Lebanon and South Yemen - also boycotted the event.<sup>23</sup>

As it turned out, the Casablanca summit represented a symbolic victory for the pro-Syrian camp, with the sixteen delegations present failing to endorse the Hussein-Arafat peace plan,

despite an appeal by the Jordanian monarch for Arab support. Instead, following the conclusion of the two-day conference, a communiqué was issued reaffirming the participants' support for the Fez peace plan. Irrespective of Syria's absence and Jordan's lobbying, most Arab states in essence agreed with Assad's position that the Arabs must negotiate from a position of strength, or were reticent to approve the peace plan and consequently incur the wrath of the Syrians. Through a combination of his own obstinacy and intimidation, and inaction on the part of his opponents, Assad had prevailed on this occasion.<sup>24</sup> However, certain decisions were taken at the Casablanca summit that would have a profound impact on Syrian-Iranian relations over the next two years. The participants agreed on the formation of a committee composed of Saudi and Tunisian representatives to mediate between Syria and Jordan, and also Iraq and Syria.<sup>25</sup>

The overall failure of the summit no doubt pleased Damascus and Tehran to varying degrees. The Syrian daily, *Al-Thawrah*, on August 10, denounced the whole affair as a meeting of "capitulationists", while Iranian Prime Minister Mir Hossein Musavi posited that "the failure of the so-called Arab summit in Casablanca" was to be expected in light of the absence of the progressive Arab states.<sup>26</sup> In parallel, in order to reaffirm their tripartite cooperation, and as a partial riposte to the emergency Arab summit in Casablanca earlier that month, on August 24-25, the foreign ministers of Syria, Iran and Libya met in Damascus to discuss their relations, developments in the region and harmonization of their positions prior to the forthcoming meeting of the foreign ministers of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in Damascus.<sup>27</sup> Following their deliberations, a joint statement was issued in which they condemned the PLO-Jordanian agreement, and the "capitulationist" Iraqi-Jordanian-Egyptian-PLO axis, described as being to the detriment of the Palestinian people and Arab-Islamic interests respectively. To Tehran's contentment, they denounced "Saddam Hussein's unjust war against the Islamic revolution in Iran" and criticized Iraq's bombardment of cities, attacks on oil tankers and use of chemical warfare.<sup>28</sup> The Syrian and Libyan foreign ministers also declared their satisfaction with Iran's repeated guarantees that it had no designs on Iraqi territory and sought good-neighborly relations and Islamic brotherhood with the Iraqi and Arab peoples. In conclusion, they announced their intention to hold the next tripartite meeting in Tripoli in December of that year.<sup>29</sup>

In many respects, this was the one of the last trouble-free meetings Syrian and Iranian officials were to have until 1988. By the autumn, new developments in the Gulf conflict and inter-Arab politics would threaten their alliance and trouble the relationship for almost two years. Tensions between the two partners were emerging due to their growing rivalry and disparate objectives in Lebanon. The rise of Hezbollah as a key player in the domestic Lebanese power game in the winter of 1984-85, coupled with the conflicting visions that Syria and Iran had of Lebanon's political future, ushered in a period of competition and recurrent disputes between Damascus and Tehran. Already in the spring of 1985, cracks had begun to appear in the alliance. Intra-alliance tensions and distrust were soon magnified because of unforeseen events in the Gulf

conflict and attempts by pro-Iraqi states to persuade Syria to abandon its friendship with Iran. Before looking at the events in the Persian Gulf, the changing dynamics of the Syrian-Iranian alliance need to be reviewed within the context of the evolving situation in Lebanon.

### **THE BEGINNINGS OF SYRIAN-IRANIAN RIVALRY IN LEBANON**

By the spring of 1985, with the Israeli retreat and the emerging power vacuum, both Syria and Iran wanted to enjoy the fruits of their common victory by playing a major role in the political future of Lebanon. However, they had conflicting visions about how the war-torn country fitted into their strategy within the broader framework of their regional foreign policies. Syria, having thwarted the establishment of an Israeli-American condominium in Lebanon during 1984-1985, and having ousted hostile foreign forces from the country, now had an opportunity to stabilize the situation by bringing the entire country into its sphere of influence. Furthermore, in view of its new-found prestige and status, Syria was determined to pursue a more activist regional foreign policy to frustrate attempts by the moderate Arab states to reach an accommodation with Israel (without addressing Syrian concerns) and weaken the pro-Iraq camp by exploiting differences among its members so as to extract concessions from them whenever possible.

As far as Iran's revolutionary regime was concerned, its pivotal role in frustrating Israeli-Western designs in Lebanon, by assisting its Syrian ally and its Lebanese Shi'ite co-religionists, had been one of its crowning foreign policy achievements, particularly in ideological terms. By dealing a blow to the "Zionist-Imperialist" camp, it had demonstrated that the struggle to liberate Palestine was not the exclusive domain of the Arabs. Although the Islamic Republic was at war with a "reactionary" Arab regime in the Gulf, this in no way diminished its sense of solidarity with progressive Arab states in their struggle. With the Israeli threat now receding, Iran sought to replicate the establishment of a theocratic state in Lebanon as a means of spreading its revolution and use it as a springboard to strike against Israel in the campaign to liberate Palestine.

Besides the stark contrast in their ideological objectives in Lebanon, Syria and Iran fell out over a number of important issues during the course of 1985. The three main areas of contention revolved around the growing rivalry between the Shi'ite Amal and Hezbollah militias, Amal's attempts to blockade the Palestinian refugee camps and Syria's confrontation with the Islamic Unification Front in the northern port city of Tripoli.

#### **The Rise of the Pro-Iranian Hezbollah Movement**

As stated earlier, subsequent to the Israeli government's decision to commence a phased withdrawal from most of southern Lebanon in December 1984, Amal and Hezbollah fighters stepped up their attacks against the IDF in the occupied areas. Already by January 1985, the Israelis had lost over 600 men and the occupation was costing them over \$1 million a day.<sup>30</sup> The two militias intensified their activities in the early months of 1985. Concurrent to the tripartite

meeting of the Syrian, Iranian and Libyan foreign ministers in Tehran in January 1985, intelligence officials from the three countries held talks at the same venue to coordinate their activities in assisting the Lebanese resistance roll back the Israelis. As a direct outcome of the deliberations, Iran was granted greater access to Lebanon via land routes from Syria that had been previously reserved for the Syrian army only. Libya also agreed to finance the purchase of a consignment of Soviet-made Grad and Sagger anti-tank missiles by Syria to be utilized by Hezbollah in southern Lebanon.<sup>31</sup> As clashes intensified between the combatants in the following weeks, the Israelis withdrew from Sidon on February 16.<sup>32</sup> By March, there had been 1,145 reported attacks against the Israelis over a two-year period.<sup>33</sup> Soon afterwards, Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres promised the Israeli public that the IDF would pull out of Lebanon within ten weeks.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, during an interview on April 3, Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin admitted that Tel Aviv had tried on several occasions to communicate with the Lebanese Shi'ite leaders in order to reach some sort of understanding with them, but "Syria had foiled most of those contacts."<sup>35</sup> In a meeting on April 25 with Lebanese Muslim leaders in Damascus, Syrian President Hafez Assad called on the Lebanese resistance to redouble its efforts to expel the Israelis and their allies from Lebanon, declaring that "the south has become Israel's Vietnam...no effort should be spared to support the nationalist resistance until the Israeli enemy is driven out of all Lebanese territory."<sup>36</sup> By the end of April, the IDF had pulled out of Tyre and strategic positions in southeastern Lebanon facing Syrian positions.<sup>37</sup>

Eventually, on June 6, 1985 - the third anniversary of the invasion of Lebanon - Major-General Ori Orr, Commander of the IDF Northern Command, announced that his forces had completed their three-phased withdrawal to the self-declared "security zone" in south Lebanon, where its surrogate force, the 3,000-strong South Lebanon Army (SLA) and 1,000 Israeli soldiers, were deployed to prevent attacks on northern Israel. By then, the Israelis had lost 750 troops in Lebanon. Although they had succeeded in eliminating the prominent PLO presence there, they now faced an implacable, fearsome foe that was homegrown - Hezbollah.<sup>38</sup>

The Israeli withdrawal in the first part of 1985 fundamentally transformed the Lebanese equation and the general perceptions of the contending parties inside and outside of Lebanon. Besides bringing Syria and Iran into conflict, other players also tried to pursue divergent agendas in the Lebanese arena. Domestic groupings such as the Phalangists, the Islamic Unification Front and Hezbollah tried to advance their own agendas, even if they ran counter to Syrian wishes, while Yasser Arafat's PLO saw the IDF retreat as a major opportunity to re-establish a Palestinian foothold in Lebanon in order to strengthen his hand vis-a-vis the Israelis and his Arab rivals, particularly the Syrians. While many of their actions ran counter to Syrian interests in Lebanon, Iran was sympathetic to varying degrees to the concerns of the Shi'ites, Sunnis and even the Palestinians, much to Damascus' chagrin. Rapidly unfolding events and the conflicting goals of the concerned parties created an extremely convoluted situation during this period, at times pitting the

Syrians against their Iranian and Libyan allies. Assad's initiative to establish a Pax Syria in Lebanon and buttress the position of Nabih Berri's Amal militia encountered resistance in many corners of the country. The first of a series of crises erupted in the spring of 1985 when Amal tried to assert itself in Beirut and its environs.

### **The Dominance of Amal and Iranian Activities**

Despite the ascendance of Hezbollah, the most dominant Shi'ite party in Lebanon in 1984-85 remained the Amal militia. As Tel Aviv proceeded with its phased withdrawal in April-May 1985 and Palestinian fighters began to trickle into Lebanon with the assistance of some Lebanese parties, Amal tried to assert itself in Beirut and the south. While Amal, with Syrian consent, gradually began to clamp down on pro-Arafat Palestinians and their Sunni allies and tighten its control over the areas it occupied, Iran embarked on a campaign to bolster the position of its Shi'ite allies, consolidate relations with Sunni fundamentalists that it had been cultivating for some time and forge close cooperative links between the Shi'ite and Sunni communities in order to invigorate Islamic solidarity in the war-torn country. Tehran seems to have sensed that the opportune moment had arrived to lay the groundwork for the eventual creation of an Islamic state in Lebanon by rallying Lebanese Shi'ites and Sunnis around the banner of revolutionary Islam.<sup>39</sup> In fact, already at this juncture, Hezbollah enjoyed steadfast support from Sunni fundamentalists. At least six prominent Sunni clerics in West Beirut were sympathetic to Hezbollah, while in Sidon a Shi'ite cleric, Sheikh Maher Hammoud, who had ties with Iran, undertook efforts to create the "Islamic Front," an umbrella organization for Shi'ite and Sunni clerics who espoused Hezbollah's cause. His activities eventually bore fruit by mid-1985.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, in the Sunni-dominated city of Tripoli in northern Lebanon, Tehran and Hezbollah succeeded in forging close ties with Sheikh Said Shaban, leader of the Islamic Unification Movement (Harakat al-Tawheed al-Islami). While he was receptive to the overtures of Iran and its Lebanese allies, Shaban, who governed the city as an Islamic fiefdom, had an anti-Syrian bias and opposed pro-Syrian forces in the region.

In order to promote their grand design in Lebanon, in early May 1985, Ayatollah Khomeini's representative and head of the powerful Martyrs' Foundation (Bonyad Shahid), Hojjatolislam Mehdi Karrubi, led an Iranian delegation to Syria and Lebanon to review developments with Arab allies and coordinate their efforts. While touring Lebanon, Karrubi met and conferred with Sheikh Fadlallah, Hezbollah's spiritual leader, and the Mufti of Lebanon's Sunni community, Hassan Khaled. He himself said the purpose of his visit was to celebrate the triumph of the Muslim resistance against the "Zionist occupiers in southern Lebanon" and to lend additional support to the strugglers against the "Zionist state."<sup>41</sup>

There is no doubt that Iran's revolutionary clerics desired to capitalize on the emerging situation in Lebanon. With the IDF in retreat and the Lebanese government weak, Tehran sought to fill the political void by creating a Shi'ite-Sunni bloc that would dominate the Lebanese political

scene and toe the Iranian line. Having invested enormous resources in its campaign to establish a bridgehead in Lebanon since 1982, Iran's clerical regime was now determined to complete its project to export its revolution to an Arab state bordering Israel and maintain its new springboard for future endeavours in the eastern Mediterranean. Its determination to implement the project was reinforced by the fact that, after three years of trying to topple Saddam Hussein and establish an Islamic state in Iraq, its efforts in Iraq and elsewhere in the Gulf region had come to naught. Only in Lebanon had the Iranians been able to achieve some solid accomplishments by gradually winning over the hearts and minds of many Shi'ites and Sunnis and sowing seeds in Lebanon's fertile ground for the growth of revolutionary Islam. In view of the stalemate in the Gulf conflict, Lebanon was the only promising arena for Tehran to channel its missionary zeal. Conversely, Syria's intention to stabilize the situation by creating a secular government involving all the various sects, and maintaining the country firmly within its sphere of influence, put Tehran and Damascus on a collision course. Interestingly enough, Palestinian attempts to make inroads in Lebanon precipitated the first major crisis between the two allies in the spring of 1985.

#### **The Beginning of the "War of the Camps" in Lebanon**

As PLO fighters continued to return to Lebanon throughout the early months of 1985, infiltrating the three main Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra, Shatila and Bourj al-Barajneh in West Beirut, the situation eventually came to a head in late May when Amal laid siege to the camps, determined to destroy Palestinian armed strength and assert its complete control. By the time the fighting erupted on May 20, 1985, it is estimated that some 5,000 PLO guerillas had made their way back to Beirut.<sup>42</sup> By the end of May, Amal, with the help of the Lebanese army's pre-dominantly Shi'ite 6th Brigade, had routed Arafat loyalists in Sabra and brought the camp under its control. However, much to their surprise and that of their Syrian patrons, in Shatila and Bourj al-Barajneh, PLO and anti-Arafat elements joined forces to resist the Amal onslaught. The assault on the camps galvanized the rival Palestinian groups. To Assad's dismay, the anti-Arafat, Damascus-based PNSF performed a volte-face. George Habash, head of the PFLP, left Damascus in protest, and the DFLP's relations with Syria became strained.<sup>43</sup> As the siege dragged on, by early June, much of Shatila was also occupied by Amal and the 6th Brigade. They demanded that the Palestinians give up their weapons and permit the 6th Brigade to oversee security in the refugee districts. Their terms were rejected outright by PLO loyalists, and even by the PNSF, which claimed to speak on behalf of camp residents.<sup>44</sup>

Although decisive blows had only recently been dealt against the Israelis and Americans in Lebanon, the "War of the Camps" now threatened to undermine Syria's newly-found power and prestige as champion of the Arab-Palestinian cause. Furthermore, the war jeopardized its relations with the radical states in the region, including Libya, Iran and South Yemen, all of which were critical of Syrian conduct.<sup>45</sup> Revolutionary Iran found itself in an extremely awkward situation vis-

a-vis its closest Arab ally. When the fighting broke out, Tehran reacted cautiously, with the foreign ministry issuing a vague statement describing the clashes as "a product of a dangerous conspiracy intended to divert the struggle of Muslim forces from the real enemy."<sup>46</sup> In terms of Iran's alliance with Syria and its interests in the region, the conflict between Amal and the Palestinians came at an inopportune moment and was detrimental in several respects. As previously mentioned, with the impasse in the Gulf and growing Arab disenchantment with Iran's conduct in the war, it was imperative for Tehran to confirm its revolutionary credentials by maintaining harmony in its relations with Syria, strengthening its foothold in Lebanon, encouraging Shi'ite-Sunni unity and keeping up the momentum in the struggle against the Israelis in order to liberate Palestine and to discredit proponents of the PLO-Jordanian initiative. Not only was the fighting straining its relations with Damascus, but also creating undesired consequences such as dividing the Shi'ite community, exacerbating cleavages between the Shi'ites and Sunnis, diverting attention away from the Israeli presence in the south and undermining the position of opponents of the Arafat-Hussein peace plan.

As the hostilities continued, prominent Iranian clerics voiced their displeasure with the unfolding events in Beirut. Khomeini's chosen successor, Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, in a meeting with Lebanese clerics and theological students in the holy city of Qom on May 28, denounced those who were exploiting the Lebanese Shi'ites as a tool for their own political purposes and instigating bloodshed between Muslim Palestinian refugees and groups of struggling Lebanese Shi'ite Muslims. Montazeri lashed out at them, arguing: "these people must repent and change their ways, and end the bloodshed and killing of Muslims which is unfortunately done in the name of Shi'ism in Lebanon. They must not provide so much propaganda material for the media of the enemies of Islam."<sup>47</sup>

Less than ten days after the fighting had erupted, Iran launched a concerted diplomatic effort to end the hostilities and exercise damage control. A team from the foreign ministry led by Director-General for Political Affairs Hossein Lavasani was dispatched to Damascus in late May, where it held meetings with Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara and anti-Arafat Palestinian leaders, and then proceeded to Beirut on May 30 to confer with Sheikh Hassan Khaled, the Sunni Mufti, and Sheikh Hussein Fadlallah of Hezbollah.<sup>48</sup> The following day, the Minister of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Mohsen Rafiqdoust, arrived in Syria, carrying a message from Ali Khamene'i for Hafez Assad. Prior to his arrival, Rafiqdoust had been in Libya holding talks with Qadhafi on recent developments. Although the ostensible purpose of his mission was to try to negotiate an end to the crisis in Lebanon, his main priority seems to have been to obtain surface-to-air and surface-to-surface missiles from Tripoli and Damascus to counter the Iraqi air offensive and retaliate against Iraqi targets.<sup>49</sup> By all accounts, upon his arrival in Damascus, Mohsen Rafiqdoust was reluctantly received by Hafez Assad, who voiced his deep displeasure with the caustic remarks of some Iranian leaders and asserted that Syrian interests took primacy in Lebanon. Rafiqdoust for his part, while trying to allay concerns and request assistance from the

Syrian leader, underscored that Iran had a privileged position in Lebanon and that its power and influence could not be ignored by the other parties.<sup>50</sup>

Meanwhile, Mehdi Karrubi also journeyed to Syria and Lebanon once again at the head of a delegation in a bid to defuse the crisis. Arriving in Damascus on June 1, he met with Syrian Vice-President Khaddam and then proceeded the next day to Beirut to make contact, in his words, with "revolutionary and concerned forces...to quell the fire of dissension and war, and rally all the forces against the real enemies...the Zionists and the USA."<sup>51</sup> Realizing the delicacy of the situation and Syrian sensitivities, in an interview on June 4 in Beirut, Karrubi tried to portray Syrian-Iranian relations in a positive light. He stated: "we agree with Syria that these clashes are the results of plots against the Lebanese and Palestinian people." Treading even more cautiously when asked if Iran desired the creation of an Islamic republic in Lebanon, he explained that the type of government in Lebanon was a domestic issue for the Lebanese people to decide. He added: "we respect the right of nations to decide their destiny, we will accept any system which has been approved by the majority of the Lebanese people."<sup>52</sup>

With the continuation of the siege, Iranian-Amal relations plunged to a new low when Karrubi's entourage was detained by Amal militiamen while touring southern Lebanon and forcibly taken back to Beirut. Angered by what was perceived as Amal's intransigence with Syrian acquiescence, Iranian Prime Minister Musavi castigated the Syrians for what he called their implicit "cooperation" with Tel Aviv and Washington. He postulated that "the disarming of Palestinians in Lebanon is serving Israeli interests and strengthens the hand of America the warmonger."<sup>53</sup> Ayatollah Montazeri also reacted sharply to the incident involving Karrubi, contending that "the fighting between the Palestinians and the Shi'ites will create deep wounds and hatred between Muslims. It is the aim of America and Israel to destroy Islam's unity. All those who encourage such a scheme are traitors to Islam."<sup>54</sup>

By early June, the situation seemed to be spiralling out of control on several fronts, with Syria losing its grip in Lebanon. In the northern port city of Tripoli, Tawheed fighters - angered by Damascus' policies - engaged the predominantly Alawite, pro-Syrian Arab Democratic Party militia in armed confrontations, while in Beirut the pro-Nasserite Murabitoun initiated hit-and-run attacks against Amal and the 6th Brigade, apparently with Libya's blessing. However, the worst was yet to come. Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party, having been sympathetic with the plight of the Palestinians all along, became increasingly alarmed by Amal's actions. During the early stages of the Amal-Palestinian conflagration, the Druze had passively supported the Palestinians by providing those fleeing the carnage with protection and passing on Libyan arms and supplies to Palestinian fighters in the camps. However, the situation finally came to a head on June 11, when large-scale fighting broke out between PSP and Amal fighters in West Beirut.



### **The TWA 847 Hijacking and Syrian-Iranian Intervention**

As the factional fighting intensified in mid-June, Shi'ite radicals orchestrated an action to voice their grievances against Israeli policies in the south on the world stage and gain the upper hand in their struggle for the soul of Lebanon's Shi'ite community. In the midst of the internecine fighting, tensions rose to new heights and international attention suddenly became focused on Lebanon as a direct outcome of the hijacking of TWA flight 847 by Shi'ite militants on June 14, carrying 145 passengers from Athens to Rome. The hijackers demanded the release of 753 Lebanese Shi'ites apprehended by the Israelis and transported back into Israel, as well as the seventeen Shi'ites imprisoned in Kuwait for involvement in bombing American and French installations in the emirate two years earlier. The aircraft initially shuttled back and forth between Beirut and Algiers. As negotiations between the hijackers and the authorities got underway, the hijackers gradually assented to releasing different groups of passengers, including women, children and non-Americans. Eventually only thirty-nine male Americans remained captive.

The hijacking was part of the broader growing power struggle between Hezbollah and Amal in Lebanon, orchestrated by Shi'ites associated with Hezbollah in order to secure the release of their co-religionists detained by Israel, to win the support of the Lebanese Shi'ites and to undermine Amal's position.<sup>55</sup> Sensing that the hijacking might prove to be a potential embarrassment and undermine his position, Nabih Berri rapidly intervened and offered to mediate in the crisis. He persuaded the hijackers to take the remaining hostages off the plane in Beirut. Some of them were retained by the hijackers, while others were taken into custody by Amal militiamen. The crisis was finally resolved after seventeen days on 30 June, in large part due to Syrian and Iranian intervention, with the thirty-nine passengers being freed and Israel buckling under pressure to allow an "unrelated" release of 300 Shi'ite detainees. In the immediate aftermath, Berri's stock rose considerably in the eyes of both the West and Lebanese Shi'ites since he was able to portray himself as politically astute and reasonable, with the hostages being freed unharmed and some of the Shi'ite prisoners being released by the Israelis. Berri had snatched victory out of the jaws of defeat, ostensibly, by cutting a deal with both Hezbollah and the United States.<sup>56</sup> It should be underscored that both Syria and Iran had played a crucial role in ending the affair through intensive deliberations and behind-the-scenes bargaining.

A solution to terminate the crisis was reached immediately following the visit to Damascus by Iranian Majles Speaker Rafsanjani, who arrived from Libya. He came at the head of a high-ranking delegation which included Foreign Minister Velayati and Revolutionary Guards Minister Rafiqdoust. During their meetings with Hafez Assad, the Syrian leader urged them to intercede and persuade Hezbollah to free the hostages.<sup>57</sup> The Syrians were eager to resolve the crisis as soon as possible and also avert a potential showdown with the United States. The hijacking and the ensuing crisis had come at an inopportune time, adding a further complication to what was already an extremely complex situation for the Syrians in Lebanon. The composition of the Iranian

delegation and the fact that its previous stop had been Tripoli suggested that its objectives were multifold. Tehran was keen to secure additional Soviet-made missiles from its Arab allies to be utilized against Iraq and also to force Amal to lift the siege on the Palestinian camps, which it perceived as detrimental to Muslim unity and its revolutionary aspirations in Lebanon.<sup>58</sup> During the visit, Rafsanjani publicly denounced Amal as not being a genuine representative of Lebanon's Shi'ites since it was facilitating "imperialist-Zionist" goals to annihilate the Palestinians.<sup>59</sup>

Following the deliberations between Syrian and Iranian officials, a group of prominent Shi'ite and Sunni clerics, including Sheikh Shamseddin, Sheikh Fadlallah, Sheikh Shaban of Tawheed (IUM) and the Bekaa Council of Ulema arrived in Damascus to meet with Rafsanjani. The purpose of their talks was to discuss conditions in Lebanon and find a solution to the TWA affair.<sup>60</sup> During the consultations with Syrian and Lebanese Muslim leaders, Rafsanjani expressed his willingness to intercede. According to some sources, Syria and Iran concluded an arrangement whereby Tehran assented to helping Damascus secure the freedom of the hostages in exchange for the latter's assistance in procuring desperately-needed Soviet weaponry for the war effort against Iraq.<sup>61</sup>

#### **Syrian and Iranian Moves in Lebanon During the Summer of 1985**

At the outset of the TWA affair, the Syrians also accelerated their efforts to resolve the Amal-Palestinian conflict in order to prevent their position in Lebanon from eroding. Although the Syrians had a major stake in the political future of Lebanon, they were loath to intervene militarily in Beirut for fear of being pulled into the fray and sustaining heavy casualties. Syria did not want to be seen as an ally of any group, taking sides against another. The protracted siege had not only embarrassed Syria and called into question its position as champion of the Palestinians, but had also jeopardized its relations with Iran, Libya and even to some extent, the Soviet Union.<sup>62</sup>

The five-week "War of the Camps" finally came to an end when the Syrians brokered a ceasefire agreement, concluded in Damascus on June 18. The accord, put together by Vice-President Abd al-Halim Khaddam and signed by Amal and the PNSF, stipulated that the Palestinians were entitled to keep their light weapons, and that security in the refugee camps would be entrusted to Lebanese gendarmes. The agreement won the approval of the other Palestinian factions and also the Druze PSP.<sup>63</sup> In reality, it represented a setback for Amal and the Syrians, since the Palestinian guerillas were entitled to retain their light arms and, to Amal's dismay, the PNSF was given an official political role in Lebanese affairs.<sup>64</sup> Amal had had to give up its declared objective of putting the camps under the control of the predominantly Shi'ite 6th Brigade.<sup>65</sup> Despite gaining some ground in the fighting, Amal had suffered extremely high casualties and could not have sustained its campaign without incurring the wrath of the Murabitoun, Hezbollah, the Druze PSP and the various Palestinian factions.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, the ceasefire could not have come sooner for the Palestinians, since they had almost run out of ammunition and

were suffering enormously. Over 600 refugees were killed and 2,500 wounded during the blockade.<sup>67</sup> Within days the siege was lifted.

Although Assad succeeded in easing tensions and restoring some semblance of peace in Beirut, he failed despite persistent efforts throughout the summer of 1985 to get Lebanon's leading political leaders to accept a reconciliation plan entailing reform of the country's archaic political system. By the early autumn, Assad focused his energies on forging a consensus among the three main militia leaders, Berri, Jumblatt and Hobeika. He had decided to bypass the traditional political leaders, who were proving to be obstinate and uncooperative, and to seek a solution by getting the three most powerful militias in the country, Amal, PSP and the Lebanese Forces, to reach an agreement. In September he arranged reconciliation talks between them in Damascus.<sup>68</sup>

Throughout this period, both Syria and Iran jockeyed to strengthen their hand and consolidate their position in Lebanon. Iran, for its part, continued to cultivate relations with fundamentalist Lebanese and radical Palestinian groups in order to preserve its revolutionary credentials, expand its base of support in Lebanon, and inspire its followers to wage war on "the Zionists and agents of Western imperialism." In August, concurrent with the Arab summit in Casablanca, a PNSF delegation led by Abu Musa and Ahmed Jibril visited Tehran and met with Prime Minister Musavi and Foreign Minister Velayati. At a press conference prior to their departure from Tehran following an eight-day visit, Abu Musa described the Casablanca summit as a failure and declared that Iran was the first non-Arab country to recognize the PNSF as the representative of the Palestinians.<sup>69</sup> In fact, the Palestinian mission in Tehran, previously run by PLO personnel, was handed over to Abu Musa, giving the PNSF its only major representation outside Syria.<sup>70</sup>

Immediately following the PNSF delegation's visit, Hussein Musawi and Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli of Hezbollah arrived in Tehran, where they held talks with Revolutionary Guards Minister Rafiqdoust and Foreign Minister Velayati about the situation in Lebanon and the fate of seven Americans and four Frenchmen held hostage by Hezbollah. Damascus was pressing Tehran at the time to use its clout to secure their release.<sup>71</sup> The two sides also explored ways to cement their relations. Musawi and al-Tufayli were subsequently granted an audience with Ayatollah Montazeri, who was a strong advocate for the establishment of an Islamic republic in Lebanon.<sup>72</sup>

### **The Taming of Tripoli and Iran's Intercession**

While Syria and its Lebanese allies achieved substantial progress in stabilizing the situation in Beirut and southern Lebanon, the longstanding deadlock in the northern port city of Tripoli persisted. In view of the tensions between Tawheed and the pro-Syrian Arab Democratic Party, the former's close links with the PLO and its efforts to prevent Syrian control and hegemony over the city and its environs, Damascus tried to assert itself by demanding that Tawheed acquiesce to the deployment of Syrian troops in Tripoli and disarm its fighters, in effect, relinquishing control of the city to the Syrian army. Sheikh Shaban agreed to permit Syrian forces to position themselves

in certain sections of Tripoli in order to play an auxiliary role to Lebanese army units and gendarmes in maintaining security in the city. However, he steadfastly rejected demands that his militiamen surrender their weapons and relinquish control of the city - a privilege Tawheed had enjoyed for two years.<sup>73</sup>

Once again, events in another area of Lebanon put Syria and Iran at loggerheads, this time in the north. Just as Iran was nurturing the growth of Hezbollah in the south at Amal's expense and had supported the Palestinians in Beirut, now, in Tripoli, the two allies found themselves on opposite sides of the fence. This was already the third major area of contention in Lebanon between the two in 1985. Besides the ongoing rivalry between Tawheed and the ADP, the situation was exacerbated by unconfirmed reports that the PLO was channelling funds and resources back into the Tripoli area, and its fighters had begun to trickle back in under the protection of Tawheed. Fighting erupted once more between Tawheed and ADP militiamen on September 15. The Syrians subsequently dispatched a military delegation to arrange a ceasefire and impose their conditions, but to no avail.<sup>74</sup> The intensity of the fighting was such during the first ten days that 250,000 of the city's 700,000 inhabitants fled their homes, 150-200 people were killed and 600 wounded.<sup>75</sup> Iran dispatched Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Sheikholislam to Damascus to confer with Syrian officials, convey Iranian concerns over the confrontation in Tripoli and try to find a peaceful solution to the crisis.<sup>76</sup> With Shaban refusing to yield to a Syrian diktat, Damascus abandoned its efforts to persuade him to agree to its terms on September 27 and opted to break the impasse through the use of force. Assad was determined to demonstrate his unbending resolve to impose control and hegemony over Lebanon.

The Syrians assembled a coalition of militias from the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), the Lebanese Communist Party and the Lebanese Ba'th Party in Syrian-held areas on the outskirts of Tripoli to attack the city and dislodge the Tawheed fighters. Although pro-Syrian in their orientation, these parties also had a score to settle with Shaban, since they had been driven out of Tripoli in 1983 when the Sunni fundamentalists succeeded in seizing control of the city.<sup>77</sup> Determined to roll back Tawheed and re-establish a presence in Tripoli, the pro-Syrian forces launched a coordinated assault on Tawheed positions and advanced under the cover of a Syrian artillery and rocket barrage. They attacked on three fronts, while the ADP militia engaged Tawheed forces inside the city.<sup>78</sup>

Concomitantly, Sheikholislam continued his deliberations with members of the Syrian leadership, including Assad, Khaddam and al-Shara.<sup>79</sup> Tehran was anxious to stop the bloodshed, particularly in view of Syria's heavy and indiscriminate bombardment of the city. As a direct result of these talks, the Syrians reluctantly accepted a proposal by Sheikholislam to send a delegation composed of Iranian diplomats from the Damascus and Beirut embassies to Tripoli to initiate discussions with Shaban and bring him back to Damascus for direct negotiations with the Syrian leadership.<sup>80</sup> Although the Iranian team made it to Tripoli, intensification of the fighting on

September 28 prevented them from bringing Shaban out. Subsequently, efforts were made to impose a temporary ceasefire to enable Shaban to journey to Syria.<sup>81</sup> Eventually, on October 1, Iran's President Khamene'i called Hafez Assad and discussed the crisis with him at length. As a direct consequence, an Iranian team was sent once again to Tripoli, returning successfully this time with Shaban and one of his associates. Negotiations between Shaban and the Syrians took place in the presence of Iranian officials and members of the Hezbollah leadership. Finally, on October 3, Assad himself presided over the signing of an accord to end the hostilities. The agreement signified a Syrian victory, leaving no doubt that Syria would be the dominant actor in Tripoli from now on. While Shaban's movement had avoided total defeat and annihilation, and Tripoli was spared a fate similar to that of Hama, Tawheed was militarily defanged. Under the terms which Shaban accepted, all medium and heavy weapons were to be turned over to the Syrian forces, and small arms had to be stored in specified depots subject to Syrian inspection. All the secular parties that had been banished from the city were permitted to re-establish a presence. Syrian troops, supplemented by Lebanese army and gendarme units, were stationed in Tripoli to maintain law and order, while the responsibility for overall security of the city was given to the commander of Syrian forces in northern Lebanon.<sup>82</sup>

Three days later, on October 6, four battalions of Syrian soldiers, including tanks, entered Tripoli and dispersed throughout the city. Both Tawheed fighters and their opponents from the secular-leftist coalition handed over their weapons to the new masters as stipulated in the truce agreement.<sup>83</sup> The "taming of Tripoli" had been a bloody affair. By the time the ceasefire was imposed after three weeks of fighting, 500 people had lost their lives, more than 1,000 had been wounded and extensive collateral damage had occurred.<sup>84</sup> While Syrian troops had not been directly involved in the fighting, the showdown demonstrated the extent to which Assad was willing to go to impose a Pax Syriana in Lebanon. Moreover, at a time when he was going through painstaking efforts to persuade the leaders of the Phalange, Druze PSP and Amal to agree on political reforms and a new order in Lebanon, Assad had deemed it necessary to pound the defiant Sunni enclave mercilessly and to set an example for potentially recalcitrant parties.<sup>85</sup>

### **Syrian-Iranian Rivalry and the Tripartite Agreement**

Syria's confrontation with Tawheed caused a great deal of umbrage in Tehran. In view of Damascus' policies to prop up Amal at the expense of Hezbollah and crush the Palestinian resistance movement in Lebanon, Iran's clerics perceived Syrian moves in Lebanon as detrimental to their grand strategy to unite Lebanon's Shi'ites and Sunnis along with the Palestinians under the banner of revolutionary Islam and liberate Palestine. During the crisis, editorials in Iran's state-controlled media lambasted Syrian conduct, accusing Damascus of waging a "war against Islam."<sup>86</sup>

In light of the Syrian regime's sensitivity to being portrayed as anti-Muslim or anti-Sunni, the vitriolic rhetoric emanating from Tehran caused disenchantment in official circles in Damascus.

Syrian-Iranian relations were put on a shakier footing by Iran's criticism of the ongoing tripartite talks between Berri, Jumblatt and Hobeika in Damascus. The participation of Hobeika, who had been responsible for the Sabra and Shatila massacres in 1982, was particularly distasteful to the Iranians. They were also infuriated that the Palestinians, Sunni fundamentalists and Hezbollah were excluded from the process. The Iranian press characterized Syria's approach to reaching a settlement in Lebanon as "smacking of compromise, hypocrisy and peaceful co-existence with Zionists."<sup>87</sup> On October 21, the chairman of the Iranian Majles' foreign affairs committee decried the presence of the Phalangists at the Damascus peace talks, asserting that the oppressed masses of Lebanon would settle for nothing less than Muslim majority rule.<sup>88</sup>

In order to iron out differences with Syria over the fate of Lebanon and promote Muslim unity in the country, during the latter half of October, a prominent member of Iran's Council of Guardians, Ayatollah Jannati, travelled to Syria and Lebanon. While in Damascus, he conferred with Hafez Assad, and then toured southern Lebanon to meet with Muslim clerics. Jannati visited Sheikh Mohammed Salim Jaleddin, the Sunni Mufti of Sidon, and a number of other Sunni and Shi'ite clergymen and political activists. During these discussions, he underscored the necessity and importance of solidarity among Muslims and preventing rifts among their ranks.<sup>89</sup>

While Iran devoted its energies in the closing months of 1985 to preserving its foothold in Lebanon and actively promoting Muslim unity with a view to creating eventually an Islamic state in its own image (as some of its clerical leaders envisioned), Syria continued its efforts to negotiate an agreement among the top three militia leaders in the country and prevent them from falling out with one another.<sup>90</sup> Between September and December, Syrian Vice-President Khaddam tried to coax them into adopting and implementing a reconciliation plan. The proposed Syrian reform package called for restructuring of the executive branch, with the Maronite Christians retaining the presidency, but transferring executive powers to the prime minister, a Sunni Muslim, as in the past.<sup>91</sup> As far as the legislative branch was concerned, a Shi'ite would continue to serve as speaker of parliament, while the number of members in the legislature would be raised from 99 to 142, equally divided among the Christians and Muslims.<sup>92</sup> It also proposed the total abolition of the sectarian structure of the government at the end of a three-year transition period. With regard to security arrangements, the plan contained eight points for the imposition of a comprehensive ceasefire throughout Lebanon - maintained by the Syrian army and the Lebanese police. Furthermore, it called for the reorganization of the Lebanese army, repatriation of refugees and disbandment of the militias.<sup>93</sup>

Although the Damascus peace plan was ready for signature by October, mistrust and rivalry held up the conclusion of the agreement. The signing ceremony was repeatedly postponed and, as a result, the elements of speed and secrecy were lost.<sup>94</sup> As details of the plan became public, those of Lebanon's traditional politicians (particularly Amin Gemayel and Camille Chamoun) who had been left out of the negotiations vehemently objected to the plan.<sup>95</sup> Samir Geagea,

Hobeika's predecessor-cum-rival in the Lebanese Forces, also voiced criticism of the Syrian-sponsored initiative. In late October, armed clashes occurred between Hobeika's supporters and those of Geagea.<sup>96</sup>

However, the series of setbacks did not deter the Syrians, who tirelessly endeavored to persuade the three militia leaders to endorse the peace plan. Finally, on December 28, following certain revisions regarding the period of transition and the number of deputies in the parliament, Berri, Jumblatt and Hobeika put their signature to the document, known as the Tripartite Agreement, intended officially to end the decade-long Lebanese civil war.<sup>97</sup> It would prove to be an extremely short-lived victory for Assad. While the US-Israeli-Maronite compact had been soundly defeated by 1985, the victors, the members of the Syrian-Iranian-Muslim coalition, were now falling out over the political future of Lebanon and proving incapable of successfully bringing the civil war to an end.

#### **THE KHARG RAIDS, SAUDI POLICY, AND THEIR REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

In mid-1985, Iraq received the latest version of the French Mirage F-1 warplane (EQ5 version), capable of launching Exocet missiles, and also acquired advanced French and Soviet-made laser-guided bombs, enabling its air force to hit targets with pinpoint accuracy. In view of its enhanced capabilities, Baghdad resolved to sever Iran's economic lifeline by intensifying its aerial campaign against the main oil export facilities on Kharg Island. It is important to note that the Kharg installations constituted the world's largest oil terminal, accounting for 90% of Iran's oil exports. Consequently, on August 15, the Iraqi air force escalated its operations by launching daring raids against the oil facilities at Kharg and continued this effort throughout the remainder of the year.<sup>98</sup>

Although the damage was quickly repaired each time, the initial raids clearly caught the Iranians, who were surprised by the tenacity of the Iraqi attacks, off guard. During late August and early September, export operations at Kharg were reduced from their normal 1.5 million b/d level, but rapid repairs were carried out and operational capacity was restored to its previous level. Tehran responded by intensifying its naval interdiction effort, searching ships bound for the Gulf Arab ports. Despite Iranian threats to resume attacks on ships heading to the GCC states, Iraq remained undeterred, continuing its aerial offensive against Kharg. By mid-September, the Iraqi air force had launched nine major attacks against Kharg, causing temporary disruption or reduction of Iran's oil exports. On September 19, Baghdad succeeded in carrying out a highly effective raid that destroyed one of the jetties and severely damaged the island's pumping station. As a result, Kharg's export capacity was cut from 1.5 million b/d to approximately 0.75 to 1 million b/d.<sup>99</sup> Determined to cripple revolutionary Iran's capacity to prosecute the war and bring it to its knees, the Iraqis carried out their eleventh raid in the six-week bombing campaign against Kharg on September 24. On this occasion, the terminal's operational capacity was gravely affected when several direct hits were scored. As a result, loading operations could not be continued and, for the

first time since the outbreak of the Gulf War, the flow of oil from Kharg stopped.<sup>100</sup>

The efficacy of the early raids had profound implications for the clerical regime, which heavily relied on oil revenues to finance the war effort. During 1985, the Iranian government devoted a third of its annual budget to military expenditures. At this juncture, oil revenues made up 80% of the budget.<sup>101</sup> Iran's only other oil export facility, on Lavan Island in the southern Persian Gulf near the Straits of Hormuz, exported only 200,000 b/d. The crisis confronting Tehran was such that Iranian President Khamene'i threatened that Iran would "close the Straits of Hormuz to all oil exporting countries in the region" if Iran was not able to continue its oil export operations.<sup>102</sup> However, by now such statements were interpreted as empty threats since Iran did not have the required capability to maintain a blow-for-blow doctrine, nor the intention to sever its own economic lifeline. Iraq, with the blessing of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf sheikhdoms, continued its aerial attacks unabated.<sup>103</sup>

The Saudis, for their part, tried to take advantage of the confluence of a number of events to pressure Iran into accepting a peaceful settlement. Several factors, among them growing anti-war sentiment inside Iran itself, the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, the Kingdom's enhanced capability to defend itself, its ability to export oil through the Red Sea, Iraq's improved capability to hit Kharg and the nascent initiative of the reconciliation committee headed by Saudi Arabia to bring Syria into the Arab fold (thereby isolating Iran diplomatically in the region), led the Saudis to conclude that the opportune moment had arrived to try to force the clerical regime to the negotiating table. The overall rationale was to thaw Saudi-Iranian relations to a certain degree in order to acquire some leverage, and in parallel to put Iran under pressure simultaneously on the political, military and economic fronts, thereby forcing it eventually to sue for peace.

Ironically, after the havoc wreaked by the attacks in late September, the Iranians reorganized and bolstered their anti-aircraft defense network on the island and its environs, making it much harder for the Iraqis to repeat their earlier successes. Consequently, subsequent Iraqi raids during the last three months of 1985 had little impact on export operations, and as Iraqi losses started to mount with an increasing number of Mirage F-1's being shot down.<sup>104</sup> Due to improvisation and the resourcefulness of their engineers, the Iranians were not only able rapidly to restore export operations, but moreover, boosted export production to almost 2 million b/d by late October to compensate for their earlier shortfall.<sup>105</sup> In fact, on average, between 1984 and 1985 Iranian oil production rose from 1.36 to 1.8 million b/d, and annual revenues from \$10.9 billion to \$12.95 billion.<sup>106</sup>

While the Iraqi air campaign was gaining momentum in the early autumn, Riyadh commenced its initiative to bring Syria back into the moderate Arab camp and exert indirect diplomatic pressure on Iran. In mid-September, the committee set up during the Casablanca summit to mend the rift in Syrian-Jordanian and Syrian-Iraqi relations and led by Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah visited the three capitals, where it met with Hafez Assad, King Hussein and



Saddam Hussein.<sup>107</sup> Subsequent to the tour of the three capitals, on September 14, it was announced that the mediation effort had already borne fruit and an agreement had been reached for Syrian Prime Minister Abd al-Raouf al-Kasm and his Jordanian counterpart, Zayd al-Rifai, to meet in Jeddah the following week in the presence of the Saudi heir apparent. Crown Prince Abdullah also emphasized that he would use his good offices to bring Syria and Iraq together at the negotiating table to achieve Arab unity and solidarity.<sup>108</sup> On September 16-17, the Syrian and Jordanian prime ministers arrived in Jeddah and held two closed working sessions with the reconciliation committee chaired by Crown Prince Abdullah.<sup>109</sup> At the end of their negotiations, a statement was issued by the Saudi Crown Prince, declaring that "the two sides agreed on a number of steps to create a propitious atmosphere" in order to cultivate closer relations and cooperate in forging an "Arab consensus" on important issues. The two parties had also agreed to continue their dialogue under Saudi auspices in October.<sup>110</sup>

Concurrent to the Syrian-Jordanian talks in Jeddah, Assad had dispatched Vice-President Khaddam to Tehran to confer with Iranian officials about developments in Lebanon and the Gulf and reassure them that Syria was not about to soften its position with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Upon arrival, Khaddam was received by President Khamene'i and handed the Iranian leader a message from Hafez Assad. Later, in a statement underscoring the importance of Syria's political stance and its invaluable support for the Islamic Republic, Khamene'i declared:

"The credibility and political prestige of Syria are backed by that country's clear-cut stand vis-a-vis the Zionist regime. Today, the whole world considers Syria the only country in the forefront of the Steadfastness Front, countering Israel...We attach great value to our friendship with Syria."<sup>111</sup>

Khaddam also met with Majles Speaker Rafsanjani, Prime Minister Musavi and Foreign Minister Velayati before leaving Tehran.<sup>112</sup> The main topics of discussion were the Syrian-Jordanian dialogue, the evolving situation in Lebanon, most notably the siege of Tripoli, and Iranian oil deliveries to Syria, which had been discontinued since September. Besides voicing concern about Syria's intentions in accepting the Saudi mediation effort and its suppression of emergent Islamist movements in Lebanon, the Iranian leadership was wary of Syria's inability to make timely payments for oil deliveries and accumulation of a sizeable debt, which stood at approximately \$1-1.3 billion by September 1985. While no solution was reached concerning future oil shipments, Khaddam reassured Iranian officials that Syria would not modify its position vis-à-vis Israel and in fact underscored that Syria had asked Jordan to reconsider its stance by abandoning the PLO-Jordanian initiative, making this a pre-condition for further negotiations between Damascus and Amman.<sup>113</sup> While seeing Khaddam off at Tehran's Mehrabad Airport, Velayati explained to the press: "Our Syrian brothers have given a negative reply to an important part of the requests of the delegation. They have accepted a meeting between the Prime Ministers of Jordan and Syria, provided that Jordan give up its compromising positions."<sup>114</sup>

Overall, Assad calculated that being receptive to the reconciliation committee's overtures and entreaties would be prudent in order to stave off complete isolation by repairing ties with some of the moderate Arab states and extract concessions - financial and material benefits - from them. At the same time, by engaging them in a dialogue he would stand a better chance of modifying their positions on important issues, particularly Jordan's with regard to peace talks with Israel. Syria's desire to diversify its relations and mend fences with the moderate Arab bloc was also influenced and reinforced by a number of emerging trends and new realities on the ground. These were related to the evolution of its ties with Iran and the Soviet Union and the shifting Arab balance of power. They included: (a) the conflicting visions of Syria and Iran over the political future of Lebanon and the role of Islamist parties; (b) Iran's inability to prosecute the war successfully in 1985; (c) its failure and unwillingness to satisfy Syria's oil requirements; (d) the gradual cooling of Syria's relations with its Superpower patron following Mikhail Gorbachev's ascension to power in March 1985; (e) the prominence of the Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi-Saudi axis in regional politics; and (f) concern about the potential success of the PLO-Jordanian initiative in reaching an understanding with Israel that would completely sideline Syria in the Arab-Israel arena.

In parallel with Iraqi moves to curb Iranian oil exports and Saudi attempts to wean Syria away from its Iranian ally, in late September, Riyadh's oil minister, Sheikh Zaki Yamani, threatened to unsheathe the oil weapon and bring oil prices crashing down if other OPEC members did not desist from violating their allotted quotas and selling at below-market prices. He posited that the Kingdom, in an unprecedented move, intended to sell its oil outside the OPEC pricing structure. Yamani also threatened to flood the market with Saudi oil, thereby depressing prices to around \$15-18 per barrel in the early part of 1986, if other OPEC members failed to maintain discipline in the coming months.<sup>115</sup> By flooding the market with their oil, the Saudis could punish those countries that had violated previous OPEC agreements, instill discipline and prevent their own oil revenues from shrinking. This would also cripple the Iranian war effort and push Tehran's revolutionaries to the negotiating table by reducing Iran's income to finance military expenditures - all at a single stroke. Against the backdrop of the ongoing Iraqi aerial campaign against Kharg and their own effort to pull Syria away from Iran, the Saudis decided to adopt a gradualist approach by giving matters more time.

The Saudi bid to reconcile differences between Damascus and Amman seemed to pay off in late October when the Syrian and Jordanian prime ministers met again in Riyadh, this time in the presence of Crown Prince Abdullah. On this occasion substantial progress was achieved, as the two sides agreed to adhere to the Arab peace plan adopted during the 1982 Fez summit, rejecting "partial and unilateral settlements with Israel" and supporting a UN-sponsored international peace conference to resolve the Arab-Israeli problem.<sup>116</sup> Since sufficient common ground had been created during the two meetings in September and October, both prime ministers concurred on the need to hold additional meetings in Damascus and Amman to explore avenues of cooperation.

There were hints that Hafez Assad and King Hussein could possibly meet in the coming weeks, while Syria, under considerable pressure from Saudi Arabia, also agreed to attend the next Arab summit scheduled to take place in the Kingdom in early 1986.<sup>117</sup> Much to Tehran's consternation, it was also announced that, as a first step to heal the Syrian-Iraqi rift, security officials from the two countries would meet on their common border to discuss matters of mutual concern.<sup>118</sup> The news of high-level contacts between the Ba'thi rivals against the backdrop of deteriorating Syrian-Iranian relations, caused by the discontinuation of Iranian oil exports to its Arab ally and unease among the revolutionary clerics over Assad's handling of the Tripoli crisis earlier in the month, raised questions in Iranian political circles about whether Syria might abandon its alliance with Iran.<sup>119</sup> In order to allay Iranian fears, Hafez Assad sent a message to Iranian Prime Minister Musavi reassuring him of continued Syrian support in the war against Iraq, while the Syrian ambassador to Iran, Ibrahim Yunis, delivered a letter from Faruq al-Shara to Ali Akbar Velayati, reiterating that prospects for reconciliation between Damascus and Baghdad were non-existent because of the "fascist" nature of the Iraqi regime and the "criminal war" it was waging against the Islamic Republic. The Syrians had informed the reconciliation committee that there was no basis for further negotiations to thaw Syrian-Iraqi relations.<sup>120</sup>

In reaction to al-Shara's letter, Velayati attempted to dismiss reports of strains in the Syrian-Iranian alliance and a shift in Syria's position in the Gulf War. He expressed his appreciation of Syria's stance and played down the significance of the ongoing dialogue with Jordan, elucidating:

"Our close relations with the regional progressive countries stem from their revolutionary, anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist and anti-reactionary stands. We are convinced that the ties and the solidarity between our three countries - Syria, Iran, and Libya - are a strategic bond. Our enemies cannot touch it by such methods. Our confidence in our Syrian brothers is too deep to be affected by such propaganda."<sup>121</sup>

Indeed, several days later, while visiting Kuwait, Iraqi Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz admitted that, despite talks between the Iraqi and Syrian representatives sponsored by the Arab reconciliation committee, tangible results had yet to be achieved in bringing the two sides closer together.<sup>122</sup> At the same time, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholislam travelled to Damascus to confer with Syrian Vice-President Khaddam.

In early November, while Iraq announced its 33rd raid against Kharg Island since August 15, the leaders of the six GCC countries gathered for a summit meeting in the Omani capital, Muscat, to discuss ways to bring the Gulf War to an end and review their relations with Iran.<sup>123</sup> After four days of deliberations, they issued a joint communiqué expressing deep concern about the recent escalation of hostilities that threatened to destabilize the Gulf region.<sup>124</sup> Interestingly enough, they announced their intention to launch an initiative to expand their dialogue with Tehran

with a view to persuading the Iranian leadership to abandon its stated objective of toppling the Iraqi Ba'athi regime and terminate the conflict.<sup>125</sup> This represented a discreet change in tactics by the GCC countries led by Saudi Arabia, to prod Iran into accepting a ceasefire. It could be best described as a subtle carrot and stick policy, bringing pressure to bear on Iran on various fronts and, concomitantly, conveying a clear message to Tehran that the GCC was amenable to forging closer cooperative links and mediating in the conflict.<sup>126</sup> The Saudi-crafted strategy was clear, to tighten the noose around Iran's neck by decoupling Syria and Iran, increasing Iran's economic woes and encouraging Iraq to inflict losses on Iran, thereby leaving Tehran with no other alternative but to accept GCC mediation to end the war.

The Saudis were pleased that the Syrian-Jordanian dialogue, initially started under their auspices, had gained enough momentum for the two countries to continue the reconciliation process on their own.<sup>127</sup> Much to Riyadh's satisfaction, Jordanian Prime Minister al-Rifai arrived in Damascus on November 12 at the head of a high-level political and economic delegation to further the reconciliation process. Al-Rifai first met with his Syrian counterpart.<sup>128</sup> During two days of talks, al-Rifai, who was accompanied by Foreign Minister Tahir al-Masri and ministers holding the portfolios for industry, trade and finance, also held discussions with various Syrian officials to establish economic cooperation between the two sides.<sup>129</sup> Al-Rifai later met with Assad and submitted an invitation from King Hussein to the Syrian leader to visit the Hashemite kingdom. The two sides agreed to harmonize their positions on the Arab-Israeli peace process and forge economic links.

Due to the fact that the tripartite meeting of the foreign ministers of Syria, Iran and Libya was scheduled to take place again in December 1985 (to coordinate their regional policies), and Iran was beginning preparations for a major offensive against Iraq some time during the winter of 1985-86, Tehran dispatched Foreign Minister Velayati on a tour of several Arab capitals to reinvigorate support for Iran's position in the Gulf War. Velayati left for Damascus on November 16 and conferred the following day with Assad, Khaddam and al-Shara on "the situation in the region and issues of mutual interest" and the agenda of the upcoming tripartite meeting, before departing for Libya and Algeria.<sup>130</sup>

Syria and Iran were both wary that their strategic alliance was beginning to unravel. Tehran continued to deny Syria oil shipments to signal its disapproval of Damascus' policies in Lebanon and express annoyance with its Arab ally's repeated failure to service its oil debt. Furthermore, there were mounting Iranian concerns about the Syrian-Jordanian rapprochement and its broader implications. Although some analysts at the time argued that Iran had discontinued the shipments due to the efficacy of Iraqi raids, the available evidence indicates that this was not the case. Iran, as mentioned previously, was able to restore its production capacity and even increase it to compensate for the sporadic shortfalls during the autumn of 1985. In reality, Tehran was refusing to be forthcoming as a means of gaining greater leverage over Damascus and

modifying its Arab ally's behavior in the region, particularly in the Arab-Israeli arena vis-à-vis the Palestinians and Lebanese Islamist movements.

To shore up relations with its Iranian ally, Syrian Prime Minister al-Kasm travelled to Tehran on December 1, accompanied by a high-level political and economic delegation, and met immediately upon arrival with his Iranian counterpart, Mir Hossein Musavi.<sup>131</sup> The first session was also attended by the ministers for foreign affairs, commerce, industry and economic affairs of the two countries. A second meeting was held the same day between the two prime ministers, along with the Syrian foreign minister and minister of state for foreign affairs, the Iranian foreign minister and deputy prime minister, to review political cooperation between the two sides on the regional level.<sup>132</sup> At the conclusion of the three-day visit, a joint communiqué was issued, announcing that a protocol on commercial and economic relations and a letter of understanding on political cooperation had been signed. As in previous Syrian-Iranian communiqués, Iraq was criticized for commencing a "cruel war" against revolutionary Iran. Baghdad was also castigated for its attempts to escalate and expand the war by bombarding cities, attacking oil tankers in the Gulf and using of chemical weapons. Both called for an end to the foreign military presence in the Gulf, while Iran once again reiterated that it had no designs on Iraqi territory. With regard to Lebanon, they demanded the "immediate, unconditional and complete withdrawal" of Israeli forces from the country. Syria was also praised for its "sincere efforts to ensure the unity of Lebanon."<sup>133</sup>

The communiqué and the recent moves of the two allies demonstrated that they were both trying to coming to terms and accept the primacy of their partner's interest in its own backyard. Syria was loath to criticize Iran for continuing the Gulf War and attacking shipping bound for Arab ports, while Iran on some level was slowly trying to come to terms with Syria's predominance in Lebanon. Iran was determined to continue its support for Hezbollah and other Lebanese Islamist movements and aimed to protect the Palestinians from Syria's proxies, particularly Amal. However, in instances where Damascus was adamant and even willing to commit its own forces to protect interests of paramount importance, Tehran was beginning to realize that it would have to defer to Damascus and accept the primacy of Syrian interests. On the other hand, the two parties were apparently unable to reach agreement on two critical issues: the resumption of Iranian oil shipments to Syria and the Damascus-Amman dialogue. Iranian officials were adamant that Syria would have to make payments as a precondition for the resumption of oil deliveries. Syria in the meantime could begin paying off its debt by exporting both industrial and agricultural products to Iran. In addition, the mere fact that no mention was made of the Syrian-Jordanian dialogue demonstrated that Tehran was highly critical and suspicious of Syrian motives.<sup>134</sup>

In order to cultivate closer ties with the GCC states, which seemed inclined to improve relations following the Muscat summit, Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati was dispatched to Riyadh on December 7. For the first time since the overthrow of the Iranian monarchy six years earlier, a minister of the revolutionary regime was received by King Fahd. Velayati remained in the

Kingdom for three days and held several rounds of talks with Saudi officials. However, the gulf between the two sides was too great for the deliberations to yield any substantive results. The Saudis had hoped to persuade Iran to accept a GCC mediation effort to end the war.<sup>135</sup> Even before leaving for Saudi Arabia, Velayati asserted that the Islamic Republic would reject the GCC initiative unless Saddam Hussein was "officially recognized and condemned as the aggressor."<sup>136</sup> The disparity in their respective positions was no doubt a major disappointment to both sides, particularly the Saudis, who had tried since May 1985 to thaw relations with Iran and persuade it to accept a ceasefire. Subsequent to three days of negotiations, Velayati tried to put on a brave face, describing the outcome of his visit as "satisfactory."<sup>137</sup> In sharp contrast, his Saudi counterpart, Saud al-Faisal, praised Iraq's willingness to accept a peaceful resolution to the conflict and posited: "we sensed no development in the Iranian stance that would allow positive action towards ending this devastating war."<sup>138</sup>

The day after Velayati ended his visit to Saudi Arabia, on December 10, Syrian Prime Minister al-Kasm arrived in Amman, accompanied by Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara and Interior Minister Mohammed Ghabbash. The Syrian delegation held discussions with Jordanian Prime Minister al-Rifai on expanding their cooperative links and was later received by King Hussein.<sup>139</sup> By the end of the second day, both sides concurred on adopting a common approach to the Arab-Israeli peace process, and King Hussein accepted an invitation from President Assad to visit Damascus before the end of the month, for the first time since January 1979. In the eyes of some observers, the reconciliation talks and al-Kasm's announcement that the Jordanian monarch would visit Syria seemed to presage a new alignment in the Middle East.<sup>140</sup> At the conclusion of the negotiations, a joint communiqué was released highlighting the need for a comprehensive peace settlement by holding an international peace conference, with both Amman and Damascus reaffirming "their rejection of partial and separate solutions as well as direct negotiations with Israel."<sup>141</sup> By now it was beyond doubt that astute diplomacy on the part of the Saudis had borne substantial fruit within a period of three months. They had also facilitated the rapprochement by providing material incentives to the Syrians. With Iran refusing to provide Syria with much-needed oil, Jordan had since October been serving as the transit point for Saudi and Kuwaiti oil shipments to Syria to make up for the shortfall.<sup>142</sup>

Subsequent to the announcement in Amman of the forthcoming meeting between the Syrian and Jordanian leaders, the Arab reconciliation committee declared its intention to accelerate its efforts to reconcile existing differences between Syria and Iraq by visiting Damascus and Baghdad in the immediate future.<sup>143</sup> However, the news of the ongoing rapprochement between Damascus and Amman, and the reconciliation committee's plan to intercede in the dispute between the two rival wings of the Ba'th Party in Syria and Iraq, were of little consolation to the Iraqi regime in the closing weeks of 1985 as it braced itself for a major Iranian push into Iraq. Frustration also mounted as its aerial campaign to stifle Iranian preparations and impede Tehran's

oil export operations proved to be ineffectual.

With Iran carrying out extensive preparations for a major operation on the southern front and massing half a million troops east of the Iraqi port of Basra, on December 16, Saddam Hussein made an unscheduled trip to the Soviet Union, his main supplier of military hardware. The Iraqi leader's visit to Moscow was his first since 1978. Saddam Hussein intended to win assurances from Mikhail Gorbachev that the gradual thaw in Soviet-Iranian relations since 1984 would in no way be to the detriment of Soviet-Iraqi relations and press him to use his clout to prise Syria and Iran apart and persuade Iran to terminate the hostilities.<sup>144</sup>

In parallel with preparations in Damascus to welcome the Jordanian monarch, on December 21, the foreign ministers of Syria, Iran and Libya gathered in Tripoli for their scheduled consultations. At the end of the two days of talks, a tripartite communiqué was issued, with the Syrians and Libyans reaffirming their support for Iran in the Gulf War. Iran reaffirmed that it had no intention of annexing Iraqi territory and aimed to have achieve good-neighborly relations and Islamic solidarity with the Iraqi people and other Arab states. The communiqué also highlighted the need for Arab-Iranian cooperation to confront Israel effectively.<sup>145</sup> Afterwards, commenting on the third round of the tripartite foreign ministers' meeting, Syrian Foreign Minister al-Shara asserted that "these three countries are in one trench and the results of this session indicate the depth of our mutual solidarity...It is imperative that we remain firm in our stance and continue our solidarity against our common enemies in order to wrest our rights from them."<sup>146</sup> Despite the facade of harmony and solidarity, Syria and Iran were unable to resolve any of their outstanding differences on issues such as Iranian oil deliveries, the Syrian-Jordanian reconciliation process and Hobeika's involvement in the Lebanese peace negotiations.

#### **THE ASSAD-HUSSEIN SUMMIT AND THE SYRIAN-JORDANIAN RAPPROCHEMENT**

In the weeks preceding the Assad-Hussein summit, substantive steps were taken to thaw relations between Syria and Jordan. King Hussein, in an extraordinary move, publicly expressed regret for having provided the Syrian Muslim Brethren with sanctuary in the past and allowing them to use Jordan as a base for their activities against the Assad regime.<sup>147</sup> The Jordanian monarch vowed that this would not happen again.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, the Jordanian media ceased to criticize Syrian policy in Lebanon, and the government in fact lauded Damascus' constructive role in the war-torn country.<sup>149</sup> Amman removed restrictions on Jordanians travelling to Syria, and telecommunication links between the two countries improved. In addition, Jordanian power stations began to supply areas of southern Syria, including four cities, with electricity.<sup>150</sup>

Both leaders had strong incentives to mend fences. The collapse of the PLO-Jordanian peace initiative under the weight of mutual distrust and divergent goals, Jordan's disillusionment with US policy in the region, and its vulnerability to any hostile moves on the part of Israel, all provided King Hussein with a strong incentive to secure his northern flank and try to negotiate with

Israel from a position of strength. Syria, for its part, aimed to break out of its relative isolation in the Arab world, bolster its political and military position vis-à-vis Israel, mitigate the challenge posed by the Iraqi-Jordanian-Egyptian axis, diversify its relations in view of the cooling in Soviet-Syrian relations, prod Iran into being more flexible on oil deliveries and cooperative in Lebanon and continue being rewarded with financial aid and oil shipments from Saudi Arabia for its liaison with Jordan.

Eventually, on December 30, King Hussein arrived in Damascus for a two-day visit to confer with Hafez Assad. The two leaders discussed normalization of bilateral relations, developments in the region and the need for Arab unity. Both sides agreed to exchange ambassadors, since their relations had been downgraded below the ambassadorial level in 1980 when they almost went to war.<sup>151</sup> Despite the warming of relations, the Assad-Hussein meeting did not produce any radical shift in Syria's political alignment nor defection from the radical camp. More significantly, the two-day visit did not lead to a joint communiqué being issued prior to King Hussein's departure. There was a complete news blackout in Syria's state-controlled media about the Jordanian monarch's visit and its aftermath. While Jordanian officials subsequently stated that the absence of a joint communiqué did not indicate failure, they must undoubtedly have been disheartened by Assad's refusal during the talks to commence a dialogue with Baghdad.<sup>152</sup> In fact, an official Syrian statement issued after the Assad-Hussein summit reaffirmed Damascus' steadfast support for Iran in its struggle until the removal of the Iraqi "aggressor."<sup>153</sup>

Overall, Assad's decision to mend fences with King Hussein was a tactical move in order to alleviate partially his security concerns in the Levant, and to increase his room for maneuver between the powerful pro-Iraqi bloc rapidly emerging in the region and his Iranian allies. The Syrian leader had no intention of severing his links with revolutionary Iran and throwing his weight behind his *bête noire* - Saddam Hussein. Although disagreements over oil and Lebanon had strained Syrian-Iranian relations during 1985, two major events in the opening months of 1986 necessitated the preservation of the relationship with Iran, from Assad's perspective. These were the collapse of the Damascus Agreement and Iran's seizure of the strategically-located Faw Peninsula.

#### **IRAN'S SEIZURE OF THE FAW PENINSULA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES**

On February 9, 1986, Iran launched its first major offensive against Iraq since the disastrous defeat in Operation Badr the previous year. The bitter lessons derived from the military setbacks and resultant losses of 1984-85 had led the clerical regime critically to reassess its conduct of the war and reappraise the relationship between the political leadership of the country and the military establishment. Consequently, during 1985-86, the revolutionary regime delegated greater authority to military commanders in planning and conducting offensive operations against the Iraqis.<sup>154</sup> The prime objective of the operation, codenamed "Wal-Fajr 8" (Dawn 8), was to seize the strategically-



situated Faw Peninsula, Iraq's primary outlet to the Persian Gulf, by crossing the Shatt al-Arab, overwhelming the Iraqi defenders and deploying sufficient forces to prevent the Iraqis from regaining it. From the Iranian standpoint, success in this endeavor offered three important advantages: it would deny Iraq access to the Gulf, enable Iran to threaten the city of Basra from the south, and position Iran to cut off Iraq's lines of communication with Kuwait.<sup>155</sup>

On the night of February 10-11, under the cover of darkness and thundershowers, Iranian troops crossed the Shatt al-Arab and quickly established bridgeheads at six points. They then ferried additional men, supplies and vehicles across the river. Over the next few days the Iranians routed the Iraqi forces on the Faw Peninsula and fortified their position by constructing ten supply bridges across the Shatt al-Arab and sending over 25,000 men and equipment. By February 16, they occupied 300 square miles of Iraqi territory. In addition, they reached the outskirts of Umm Qasr and captured Iraq's main air control and warning center covering the Persian Gulf area.<sup>156</sup>

The Iraqi High Command was slow to react to the Iranian advances in the Faw Peninsula. As a result, Iran was able to achieve strategic surprise and deploy adequate numbers of men and materiel to consolidate most of its initial gains and repulse Iraqi attacks. Once the Iraqi counteroffensive got underway, it was impeded by lack of air cover due to poor weather conditions. The battle for Faw raged on for almost a month, until mid-March. By then the frontlines had stabilized, with both the Iranian offensive and Iraqi counterattacks gradually petering out. Iran was able to hold on to most of its gains and maintained an active force of 20-25 thousand men on the peninsula.<sup>157</sup>

In general, Wal-Fajr 8 was the best planned and executed operation by the Iranian military since the expulsion of the Iraqi army from Iranian territory in the spring of 1982. The offensive had required extensive preparations and a high degree of coordination among the various services, including the army, Revolutionary Guards and Baseej volunteers. Meticulous planning and proper preparations and execution had ensured success. As a result of the victory on Faw, the professional military won a greater voice in the future conduct of the war.<sup>158</sup>

The occupation of the Faw Peninsula sent tremors throughout the Gulf Arab states, particularly Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, since they now had to consider a long-term Iranian military presence near their borders and the prospect of an Iraqi military defeat in the war. During the first week of fighting, on February 16, the Saudi Foreign Minister, Saud al-Faisal, and his Kuwaiti counterpart, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, flew to Damascus to discuss the Gulf conflict with Hafez Assad and Faruq al-Shara.<sup>159</sup> The ostensible purpose of their visit was to persuade the Syrians to moderate Iran's behavior and also inveigle them to decrease their support for their Iranian ally if Tehran was not receptive to their entreaties. Prince Saud also delivered a message from King Fahd to Hafez Assad. In view of the proximity of the fighting and their vulnerability to Iranian attacks, the Kuwaitis were particularly alarmed by the events unfolding in Faw.<sup>160</sup>

Following on the heels of the two Arab foreign ministers' one-day visit, Iranian Deputy

Foreign Minister Mohammad Besharati travelled to Damascus and Tripoli to brief the Syrian and Libyan leadership about the situation on the warfront and consult them on other regional issues.<sup>161</sup> In Damascus, Besharati conferred with Hafez Assad and also delivered a message from President Khamene'i. After their deliberations, Besharati told a press conference that Iran would continue the war until the Iraqi Ba'thi regime had been overthrown. While underscoring that Iran's decision to pursue vigorously its effort to topple and punish the aggressor was "final and irrevocable," he attempted to allay the fears of the Gulf states by positing that Tehran extended "a hand of friendship to all its Arab neighbors."<sup>162</sup> Subsequent to his visit to Libya, as the fighting raged on in the Gulf, Besharati stopped over in Damascus once again on the return leg of his trip to discuss the latest developments with the Syrians. Following a meeting with Besharati on February 22, Hafez Assad made a public statement, broadcast in the Syrian news media, expressing his satisfaction with Tehran's assurances that it did not covet any Iraqi territory. Besharati also told journalists that "Iran was determined to regain its legitimate rights violated by the Iraqi regime, through punishment of the aggressor." He added that, once its goals were achieved, it was up to the Iraqi people "to take their destiny into their own hands" and decide on their future.<sup>163</sup>

Overall, it seems that Syria was somewhat ambivalent about the success of Wal Fajr-8. On one hand, the Iranian victory increased the chances and even held out the prospect of an Iraqi defeat in the 65-month-old war, to the delight of the Syrians. On the other hand, the seizure of Faw made Syrian statements that Damascus was able to moderate Iranian behavior seem dubious. The Syrians continued to defend Iran's military campaign, qualifying their support at the same time by declaring that, if the Iranians demonstrated any expansionist tendencies or coveted Arab land, they would sever their links with Iran. On the whole, Syria's ideological stance and justifications for its alliance with non-Arab Iran seemed increasingly untenable and left it exposed to charges of betraying Arab interests.<sup>164</sup> Iran's breakthrough at Faw and subsequent intimidation of the lower Gulf states gave more ammunition to its opponents, who portrayed the Gulf War as an Arab-Persian conflict.<sup>165</sup>

Iran's military success greatly alarmed neighboring Arab states, prompting an emergency session of the Arab League foreign ministers to be convened on March 24 in Tunis. This decision to hold an extraordinary meeting reflected the level of unease in the Arab world over Iran's seizure of Faw and the possibility of a total Iraqi collapse. The success of Wal-Fajr-8 had sent shockwaves throughout the Arab world and polarized it more than ever before. Both camps, particularly the pro-Iraqi bloc, now resolved to take drastic measures to bring pressure to bear upon Tehran and avert an Iraqi defeat in the war. During March 1986, Saudi Arabia, which had warned of a price war in the oil markets for some time, finally unsheathed the oil weapon by flooding the international market with Saudi crude. Overnight, oil prices plummeted from around \$30 per barrel to just under \$10. With a single stroke, Iran's oil revenues, vital to finance the war effort, had been cut by almost 70%. Besides economic considerations (namely, the desire to restore discipline in OPEC

and recoup its lost influence in the cartel), there is little doubt that the Saudi move was also motivated by the desire to cripple Iran's war machine and force the clerical regime to the negotiating table to resolve the conflict peacefully. The concurrent oil price collapse and the opprobrium brought by the seizure of the Faw Peninsula in March 1986 reinforced Tehran's sense of embattlement and political isolation in the region, thereby increasing its dependence on the goodwill of its remaining Arab allies, particularly Syria.<sup>166</sup>

On March 20, Syrian Foreign Minister al-Shara visited Tehran, delivering a message from President Assad to his Iranian counterpart and conferring with Iranian officials about recent developments.<sup>167</sup> In a drastic move, demonstrating the extent of Iraq's fury with Iran's success at Faw and al-Shara's trip to Iran, in the days preceding the Arab League meeting in Tunis, Iraqi Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz submitted a memorandum to Arab League Secretary-General Chedli Klibi severely reproaching Syria's stalwart support for Iran, calling it treasonous behavior. In the memorandum, Tareq Aziz stated that Syria was flagrantly violating the Arab League Charter and the Arab Defense Pact through its continued support for Iran. He characterized al-Shara's visit to Iran as a provocative act, contrary to "all Arab values and principles." He also depicted Damascus' conduct vis-à-vis the Palestinians and its policies in Lebanon as gross violations of the Arab League Charter.<sup>168</sup>

During the stormy session in Tunis, despite the vehement objections of the Syrian and Libyan delegations, the Arab League issued a strongly-worded communiqué, severely condemning Iran's occupation of Iraqi territory and expressing solidarity with Baghdad in its rightful and legitimate defense of Iraq's "national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity."<sup>169</sup> By this juncture, the repeated statements by Iranian officials vowing to prosecute the war until the ouster of the Iraqi Ba'thi regime, their numerous threats to punish Iraq's Arab backers and the occupation of the Faw Peninsula made Syria's justifications for its pro-Iranian stance look highly implausible, if not completely absurd, from the perspective of many Arab League members.<sup>170</sup>

Riding high on the tide of the victory at Faw, Iran seemed unshaken by the Arab League condemnation and was more determined than ever to prosecute the war until the overthrow of the Iraq Ba'th. A negotiated settlement seemed to be the last thing on the mind of Iranian officials. The mindset prevailing among the Iranian leadership at the time was reflected in statements made by Foreign Minister Velayati on Friday, March 31, in an interview with the Persian-language daily, *Ettela'at*, in which he underscored that mediation efforts to end the war were futile. He urged the Gulf states to distance themselves from Saddam Hussein in view of the recent setbacks suffered by the Iraqi army on the battlefield. He brushed off Saudi efforts aimed at healing the Syrian-Iraqi rift and concomitantly decoupling Syria and Iran. Velayati emphasized that Tehran and Damascus had a common stand on the issue of the Gulf War and the fate of the Baghdad regime, adding: "we are confident about the firmness of the political position of our friendly and brotherly country."

While the mood in Tehran was buoyant following Wal Fajr-8, this was tempered by concern

that Iran was becoming increasingly ostracized by the Arab world. Sharp differences were also arising with Syria as a direct result of policies the clerical regime was pursuing in the Gulf and Lebanon. Moreover, the oil price collapse in early 1986, coupled with Iran's growing isolation and war-weariness at home, gradually brought about a realization that the war effort could not be sustained indefinitely.<sup>171</sup> If Iran was to achieve its ultimate objective of toppling Saddam Hussein, this would have to be achieved within a limited timeframe. Consequently, in the months that followed, Iranian leaders began to talk about a "final offensive" to deliver the coup de grace against Baghdad. After the success in Wal Fajr-8, Iranian military planners went to work, carefully drawing up a strategic plan for their next major operation.

### **THE COLLAPSE OF THE TRIPARTITE AGREEMENT AND SYRIA'S WORSENING PREDICAMENT**

Against the backdrop of the tumultuous events of 1982-85, the Syrians had invested great effort in hammering out the Tripartite Agreement signed by Hobeika, Berri and Jumblatt. However, from the very outset, the accord lacked legitimacy, particularly in many corners of the Maronite camp.<sup>172</sup>

It was Samir Geagea, though, who resolved to torpedo the agreement, having received the support of the influential Maronite monastic orders led by Abbot Bulos Naaman, along with prominent political figures such as Amin Gemayel and Camille Chamoun.<sup>173</sup>

On January 8, elements within the Lebanese Forces loyal to Samir Geagea engaged pro-Hobeika forces in combat, culminating in intense intra-Maronite fighting. After seven days of fierce clashes, Geagea's men finally stormed Hobeika's headquarters. During the assault, some 200-300 pro-Hobeika militiamen were slaughtered. However, Hobeika and some of his key aides were spared and allowed to leave the country, due to intense Syrian pressure. His departure on January 15 signified the collapse of the Tripartite Agreement.<sup>174</sup> The ouster of Hobeika represented a double coup: one by Geagea against Hobeika's faction within the Lebanese Forces, and the other by Amin Gemayel against Assad to demonstrate his contempt for the Syrian-sponsored agreement.<sup>175</sup> There is no doubt that Geagea's action came as a profound shock to Hobeika and Assad, who had been completely unaware of the conspiracy brewing against them.<sup>176</sup> The failure of the December 28 accord was a major disappointment for Damascus, since there could be no durable solution in Lebanon without Maronite participation. Three days after the rout of Hobeika's forces, on January 18, the National Unity Front, comprising pro-Syrian Lebanese political parties, declared a boycott of Amin Gemayel, with Nabih Berri and Walid Jumblatt subsequently demanding his removal from office.<sup>177</sup>

Besides eroding Syria's position in Lebanon, the collapse of the Tripartite Agreement was a major blow to Syrian prestige on the regional and international level, which must have pleased its opponents. Although it cannot be determined whether the anti-Hobeika camp received any direct foreign support, the outcome of events was viewed in a positive light by Tel Aviv and Washington,

since they had scores to settle with Damascus. The collapse of what seemed to be an emergent Pax Syriana in Lebanon meant that Damascus needed to cultivate as many allies as possible in Lebanon in its efforts to forge a new consensus and stabilize the situation. Indeed, if the Tripartite Agreement had succeeded, Syria could have afforded to assume a more confrontational stance vis-a-vis groups such as Hezbollah. However, the failure of the accord called for accommodation, in order to avoid alienating the rapidly growing pro-Iranian militia and unnecessarily straining relations with Tehran. Both on the domestic level in Lebanon and regionally, Assad needed to carry out a very careful balancing act, trying to advance Syrian interests, but not venturing so far as to antagonize the revolutionary clerics in Tehran and the radical elements in Lebanon. This need was reinforced by the outbreak of fighting between various factions throughout the country during the winter. While Syria and Iran attempted on a number of occasions to restore order by forging a consensus among Amal, Hezbollah, the PSP, the Murabitoun and the Palestinians, conditions had become so fluid and strife-ridden that they could no longer contain the political crisis.<sup>178</sup>

The Lebanese crisis was further exacerbated as PLO fighters continued to infiltrate Lebanon, leading to a new round of Amal-Palestinian clashes. This in turn contributed to an escalating spiral of tensions as Syria backed Amal, and Iran and Hezbollah threw their weight behind the Palestinians. In spite of significant differences with his Iranian allies, Assad was loath to jeopardize his strategic partnership with Iran. He was also reluctant to commit troops to crush his Lebanese opponents. Therefore he had to tread cautiously, while attempting to assert Syrian control in Lebanon.

As the year progressed, there were increasing signs of tension between the two camps. Besides the fighting between Amal and joint Hezbollah-Communist forces in Beirut in early February, clashes occurred the following month between Syrian forces and Hezbollah in the Bekaa Valley. Despite the growing friction between the Syrian army and Hezbollah, which maintained its regional headquarters in Ba'albek, Assad was reluctant to move against them for fear of jeopardizing his alliance with Iran, and Hezbollah destabilizing the situation in Lebanon.<sup>179</sup> During the same month, when the leaders of the various Muslim militias, including Amal, the Murabitoun and PSP, reached an agreement under Syrian auspices to form a 1,500-man joint strike force in West Beirut to impose order, Hezbollah declined to join the arrangement.<sup>180</sup>

The Syrians already felt embattled on several fronts. A series of events in late 1985 and early 1986 put Syria and Israel on a seemingly irreversible collision course. In response to the downing of two Syrian MiG-23 aircraft over Syrian airspace by Israeli warplanes on November 19, 1985, Damascus once again moved SAM missile batteries across the border into the Bekaa Valley. This precipitated another missile crisis similar to the one in 1981, which was eventually resolved through American mediation. However, another crisis flared up after the Israeli air force brought down a Libyan executive jet, on February 4, 1986, bound for Damascus with a high-ranking Syrian

delegation, including the Assistant Secretary-General of the Syrian Ba'th Party, Abdullah al-Ahmar. Damascus was outraged when a resolution introduced in the UN Security Council condemning the Israeli action was vetoed by Washington. During March and April, a number of bombings occurred in Syria, killing at least 140 civilians and wounding many others. These events were blamed by the authorities on either Iraqi or Israeli agents. The violent incidents, along with the discovery of a bomb intended to blow up an El Al airliner at London's Heathrow airport - allegedly planted by Syrian air force intelligence - exacerbated the situation and exposed Syria to international opprobrium. Although the perpetrator, Nizar Hindawi, a Jordanian national, later surrendered himself and confessed to being a Syrian operative, there is reason to believe that he may have been a double agent, and that the plot had been a set-up to incriminate the Syrian government. In fact, Western intelligence officials subsequently commented on the amateurism of the plot and surmised that Israel might have orchestrated the operation in order to have a convenient *casus belli* during the spring of 1986 if it opted to precipitate a military confrontation with Syria.<sup>181</sup>

As Tel Aviv and Damascus edged closer to war by conducting large-scale maneuvers on the Golan front, Washington and Moscow were unnerved by the prospect of another Arab-Israeli conflagration and took measures to contain the situation by urging both sides to exercise restraint. In May, Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan took decisive steps to avert a military confrontation and at the same time reaffirmed their commitment to safeguarding the security of their regional partners. The Superpowers thereby succeeded in moving their respective allies away from the brink of war.<sup>182</sup>

In the aftermath of the Hindawi affair, the prospects of international condemnation and isolation, along with potentially damaging economic sanctions, being imposed by the West on Syria were quite unsettling to the Syrian leadership, at a time when the threat of a major military confrontation with Israel was also looming on the horizon. As Damascus' sense of embattlement and insecurity became more pronounced on the regional and international level during the spring of 1986, it threatened Tehran with withdrawing its support in the Gulf War unless its Iranian ally was more forthcoming in using its influence in Lebanon to free the nine French and five American hostages.<sup>183</sup> Reportedly, visiting Iranian emissaries were bluntly told in Damascus that, if Tehran failed to secure their release, not only would Syria re-assess its policy towards Iraq, but also use brute force to suppress Iran's Shi'ite fundamentalist allies in Lebanon.<sup>184</sup> At this point, obstinacy on the part of Iran and Hezbollah was something Syria could ill afford if it aimed successfully to derail British-led efforts to punish it for its involvement in the Hindawi affair, and to strengthen its hand in inter-Arab politics.

In Lebanon, tensions rose to new heights and the situation came to a head on May 1, when Syrian army units in Ba'albek reportedly tried to secure the release of foreign hostages held in the Sheikh Abdullah barracks. The incident occurred as the G-7 summit got underway in Tokyo to discuss, among other things, Syria's role in sponsoring international terrorism.<sup>185</sup> During a one-

hour gun battle, three Hezbollah militiamen were wounded, while one Syrian soldier was killed and three others injured.<sup>186</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the incident, Hezbollah kidnapped two Syrian officers. The Syrians responded promptly by detaining a number of Hezbollah members, demanding the immediate release of the officers. The militiamen subsequently complied that same evening, with the Syrians releasing the Hezbollah fighters the following morning. The Syrians cordoned off Ba'albek by establishing roadblocks in and around the town, and prohibited anyone from entering or leaving it as part of their security measures. More fighting took place the following day, resulting in 10 men on both sides being wounded.<sup>187</sup>

Concurrent to the outbreak of fighting in Ba'albek on May 1, Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati arrived in Damascus to confer with Assad and other Syrian officials on developments in the region. Eleven days later, his Syrian counterpart, Faruq al-Shara, flew to the Iranian capital, demanding the immediate release of the Western hostages from Iranian officials and threatening the withdrawal of support in the Gulf conflict. According to the Kuwaiti daily, *Al-Qabas*, on May 16, the Iranians apparently refused to use their influence with Hezbollah to gain the freedom of the hostages without any concessions from the West. The fact that the release could ease tensions between Syria and the West in the aftermath of the Hindawi affair and help avert the adoption of measures by the EC and US against Damascus was not enough to sway the Iranians.<sup>188</sup>

As tensions with Israel continued to escalate, Damascus initiated efforts on every front to prevent sliding into greater isolation and inviting the Israelis to carry out a first strike. While Assad tried to continue mending fences with Jordan's King Hussein in May 1986, Syria bolstered its defenses and put them on heightened alert to deter an Israeli attack.<sup>189</sup> An all-out effort was undertaken to secure the release of the hostages in order to relieve pressure from Washington and Paris. In tandem with al-Shara's moves in Tehran, Assad called Ali Khamene'i, requesting him to intercede in the Lebanese hostage affair. On May 28, Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas confirmed that the Syrian military had been negotiating with the captors to secure the release of the French hostages.<sup>190</sup>

#### **THE RENEWAL OF THE WAR OF THE CAMPS AND SYRIAN-IRANIAN MEDIATION EFFORTS**

The situation in Lebanon became more convoluted in May and June 1986 as PLO fighters gradually trickled back into Lebanon and made their way back to the refugee camps, thus precipitating another Amal siege of the Palestinian refugee camps and putting Syrian-Iranian relations to the test. In late May, heavy fighting erupted in southern Beirut between Amal militiamen and Palestinian fighters, costing the lives of more than 80 people during the first two weeks. Tehran dispatched Deputy Foreign Minister Besharati to the Levant to stop the bloodshed and hammer out an agreement. Talks between the two sides held at the Iranian and Algerian embassies in Beirut initially proved fruitless.<sup>191</sup> Besides meeting Amal and PNSF leaders, Besharati also held talks with Lebanese Prime Minister Karami. Prior to his arrival in Beirut,

Besharati had conferred with Assad about the Amal-Palestinian conflict in Damascus.<sup>192</sup> The Iranian envoy eventually succeeded in negotiating a temporary ceasefire in order to supervise a two-hour mercy mission by six Iranian doctors to take eight ambulances into the besieged Bourj al-Barajneh camp and evacuate wounded Palestinians. Meanwhile, Nabih Berri travelled to Damascus, where he urged the Syrian leadership to send troops into Beirut to restore peace and order.<sup>193</sup> As Syrian and Iranian negotiating teams headed by Vice-President Khaddam and Deputy Minister Besharati continued their deliberations to find a solution, Karami and other Lebanese Muslim leaders subsequently arrived in Damascus, pleading for Syrian military intervention to end the War of the Camps.<sup>194</sup> Finally, in mid-June, Amal and the PNSF announced a truce. The two agreed to form a 1,500-man special force under Syrian auspices to maintain the ceasefire.<sup>195</sup> Although the siege was not lifted, the three weeks of hostilities ended, having taken the lives of 140 people and leaving 800 injured.<sup>196</sup>

As the fighting died down in Beirut (if only temporarily), in early July, elements of the special force to monitor the ceasefire took up positions in the capital. This included the deployment of some 200-300 Syrian Special Forces commandos in West Beirut, thereby marking the return of a Syrian military presence in the city after four years. A security committee composed of representatives from both West and East Beirut also met to coordinate efforts to restore peace and order and re-open crossings along the Green Line. Many Christian leaders, with the exception of Amin Gemayel, welcomed Syria's moves.<sup>197</sup> By the latter part of the month, senior Syrian military intelligence officers had entered into negotiations with Hezbollah leaders to extend the security plan to the fundamentalist movement's strongholds in the suburbs of southern Beirut, where the French and American hostages were believed to be held.<sup>198</sup> Despite initial opposition by the pro-Iranian movement, after almost four weeks of sensitive negotiations, it bowed to pressure from the Syrians and its Iranian benefactors, consenting to the deployment of Syrian and Lebanese security forces in southern Beirut, on an understanding reached between Damascus and Tehran that the Shi'ite fundamentalists would retain their positions and continue to operate freely.<sup>199</sup> Consequently, on August 4, a contingent of 750 Lebanese soldiers and gendarmes, along with 200 Syrian troops, entered the Shi'ite suburbs of south Beirut; they were to be responsible for curbing violence and preventing more Palestinian guerrillas from entering the refugee camps.<sup>200</sup>

As a result of Iranian entreaties, Hezbollah grudgingly accepted the implementation of the Syrian-sponsored security plan in Beirut. Tehran clearly did not want to antagonize its main Arab ally in its own backyard, even if it meant curbing Hezbollah's freedom of action to a limited extent. In general, the situation in Lebanon stabilized to a substantial degree for a few months, until fighting between Amal and the Palestinians flared up once more in the closing weeks of the year.



## **THE SYRIAN-JORDANIAN RAPPROCHEMENT AND IRAN'S RESPONSE**

By mid-1986, conflicts of interest between Syria and Iran over the political future of Lebanon, the Amal-Hezbollah rivalry and the fate of the Western hostages, along with Syria's failure to service its oil debt, had strained relations between the two allies. In Tehran, two opposing camps within the ruling elite had crystallized over how to handle the relationship with Damascus. Foreign Minister Velayati, at the head of the "pro-Syrian lobby," was a strong advocate of continuing the seven-year-old alliance, in view of Syria's critical role in supporting the Iranian war effort in the early stages of the Iraqi invasion and occupation between 1980 and 1982, permitting Iran to establish an important presence in Lebanon and incessant lobbying on behalf of Iran in the Arab League throughout the years. On the other hand, other prominent political figures within the Iranian leadership, led by Chairman of the Majles' Foreign Affairs Committee Ahmad Azizi, opposed perpetuating an alliance which yielded few - if any - tangible benefits to Iran's revolutionary cause at this stage. They argued that, on the whole, preserving links with Damascus was to their detriment, since Syria was over \$1-2 billion in arrears on payments for Iranian oil shipments since 1982, the Syrian army had consistently impeded the activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards' contingent in Lebanon and Damascus' current contribution to the Iranian war effort by selling Soviet-made light weapons to Iran was negligible at best.<sup>201</sup> Overall, the dominant elements within the Iranian regime were concerned about Syria's threats to discontinue its diplomatic and military support for its non-Arab ally in the Gulf conflict, its insistence on securing the freedom of Western hostages in Lebanon without Iran deriving any tangible benefits, its efforts in Lebanon to circumscribe the activities of Hezbollah and the Palestinian resistance and its inability to service its outstanding debt to Iran. Iranian concerns were heightened in May when Assad accelerated his policy of thawing relations with Jordan.

From the Syrian standpoint, the precarious situation in Lebanon, the specter of a military confrontation with Israel in the aftermath of the Hindawi affair and its troubled partnership with Iran, all combined, put Syria in an extremely vulnerable position. Assad felt exposed on several fronts and needed to adopt a proactive policy to mitigate Syria's precarious security situation, and concomitantly strengthen his bargaining position vis-à-vis Tehran, in order to obtain its compliance on resuming oil shipments and restoring order in Lebanon. Syria decided to continue on the path towards normalizing relations with Jordan for a number of reasons: to secure its southern flank, to have an Arab ally also bordering Israel in case of a military showdown with Tel Aviv and to extract concessions from Iran - and perhaps Saudi Arabia - by feigning a rapprochement with Iraq and, if the opportunity presented itself, exploiting renewed links with Baghdad without giving up too much in return.

Assad journeyed to Amman on May 5 for a two-day visit, his first since 1977.<sup>202</sup> While nothing concrete seemed to have come out of the talks, the fact that both sides expressed optimism about their future bilateral relations, and Hosni Mubarak's unscheduled visit to Aqaba five

days later for consultations with the Jordanian monarch, raised hopes.<sup>203</sup> Speculation increased when Assad declared on May 9, while addressing a group of Syrian lawyers, that the time had come to end the Gulf war.<sup>204</sup> In the days that followed, Syrian Vice-President Khaddam revealed that the summit meeting between Assad and King Hussein had enabled them to remove obstacles on the path towards normalization of relations and rebuild trust and confidence. He asserted that both Damascus and Amman had concurred on the need to harmonize their positions vis-à-vis Israel, and to refrain from entering into bilateral negotiations with Tel Aviv to secure separate peace agreements. Khaddam asserted that Syria would pursue the path of reconciliation with Jordan in order to further its regional interests.<sup>205</sup>

Prior to Assad's visit to Jordan, Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati and Revolutionary Guards Commander Rafiqdoust visited Tripoli and Damascus to confer with their Arab allies.<sup>206</sup> There were no indications that anything substantial came out of the Syrian-Iranian talks. In spite of clashes between Hezbollah and Syrian forces in the Bekaa, Syrian pressure on Iran to obtain the release of Western hostages (in order to deflect some criticism from the West) and Tehran's adamant refusal to resume oil shipments to Syria, Iran's state-controlled media dismissed reports about a possible Syrian-Jordanian reconciliation.<sup>207</sup> By mid-May, the Syrians felt embattled on a number of fronts. Britain's decision to expel three Syrian diplomats produced a similar riposte on the part of Syria, while US President Reagan's statements threatening punishment if Syria pursued policies similar to those of Libya unnerved Assad.<sup>208</sup> The sense of siege in Damascus was compounded by conflicting signals emanating from Israel. Some Israeli officials tried to play down reports about an imminent military confrontation with Syria, but on May 13 Prime Minister Peres bluntly declared that Israel could not reach any understanding with Syria as long as Assad remained in power.<sup>209</sup> These events coincided with Faruq al-Shara's visit to Tehran, where he met with President Khamene'i, Prime Minister Musavi and Foreign Minister Velayati to review the situation in the region, particularly the prospects of Israeli military action against Syria and Iranian cooperation in persuading Hezbollah to release Western hostages.<sup>210</sup>

At this critical stage, Damascus had good reason to suspect that the Israelis and Americans had strong motives to opt for a military confrontation. Since 1982, the Syrian armed forces had grown by more than 60%, equipped with the latest Soviet-made hardware in order to achieve "strategic parity" with Israel in both quantitative and qualitative terms. The Syrians believed that, from Peres' perspective, a military victory would enable him to cut the Syrian military down to size. Secondly, he could then call for general elections and win decisively at the polls before having to hand over power to his Likud coalition partners in October 1986. Thirdly, there was also little doubt that the Reagan administration would look favorably on an ignominious defeat for Syria, after being humbled by Damascus and its allies in Lebanon during 1983-84. Fourthly, vanquishing Assad would in effect derail the nascent Syrian-Jordanian rapprochement, that threatened to build a unified position against Tel Aviv, and isolate Jordan. It would leave King

Hussein with little choice but to enter into direct negotiations with Israel to secure his western frontier. While treading carefully and considering his options, Assad decided to bolster his defenses by deploying troops along the Golan Heights in a bid to deter an Israeli first strike.<sup>211</sup>

Although Syria had not received any Iranian oil deliveries for many months, on May 15, the previous Syrian-Iranian oil agreement officially expired, and no steps were taken to negotiate a new deal.<sup>212</sup> Iran's non-compliance on securing the release of Western hostages and withholding of oil shipments frustrated the Syrian leadership during this crucial period. Sensing an opportunity to accelerate the reconciliation process with Syria and exploit the Syrian-Iranian rift in order to lay the foundations for a Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement, King Hussein intensified his efforts in late May and early June to achieve a major breakthrough.<sup>213</sup>

In economic terms, by the spring of 1986, Syria was also in dire straits. Unable to pay off the \$1-2 billion it owed to Iran, Damascus continued to seek Saudi and Kuwaiti assistance to make up for the shortfall in its domestic oil requirements and had also begun since March to purchase 48,000 barrels of crude oil every fifteen days on the Mediterranean market.<sup>214</sup> Plagued by shortages of various goods, the country's foreign exchange reserves had by the end of May been reduced to a meagre \$100 million, equivalent to two weeks worth of imports. Its total foreign debt stood at approximately \$18 billion, with the lion's share of \$15 billion being owed to Moscow for the procurement of Soviet arms. The only significant foreign financial aid Syria was receiving was an annual sum of \$500-700 million from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, under the terms of the 1978 Baghdad summit resolution of the Arab League.<sup>215</sup>

The pro-Iraqi camp had high hopes at this point that it could decouple Syria and Iran, thereby terminating their alliance and paving the way for an Arab summit in the summer.<sup>216</sup> King Hussein sought to bring Syria and Iraq together as a means not only of restoring unity in Arab ranks and bolstering Jordanian security, but also of isolating Khomeini's Iran and forcing it to seek a negotiated settlement to the six-year-old Gulf conflict. Consequently, on May 24, accompanied by Prime Minister Zayd al-Rifai and Foreign Minister Taher al-Masri, the Jordanian monarch made an unscheduled seven-hour visit to Damascus and held two rounds of talks with Assad.<sup>217</sup> The main items on the agenda were bilateral links and the prospects of thawing Syrian-Iraqi relations.<sup>218</sup>

Less than 24 hours after returning to Amman, on May 26, King Hussein travelled to Baghdad to confer with Saddam Hussein on the outcome of his deliberations with the Syrian leader.<sup>219</sup> The outcome of the negotiations in both Arab capitals proved encouraging for the Jordanians to such an extent that, on May 27, the King dispatched Prime Minister al-Rifai to Athens on a four-hour visit to meet with Assad, who had arrived in the Greek capital the previous day on a three-day state visit.<sup>220</sup> Al-Rifai reportedly delivered a message from King Hussein to the Syrian leader and briefed him on the progress of the reconciliation effort subsequent to the bilateral meetings in Damascus.<sup>221</sup>

In the aftermath of al-Rifai's consultations with Assad, expectations for a breakthrough ran

high. On May 27, *Al-Siyasah* reported that Amman had indeed secured the agreement of both sides for a summit meeting between the Syrian and Iraqi presidents. However, Iraqi Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz subsequently revealed that a preliminary meeting at the foreign ministerial level would be held, cautioning that it was premature to reach any definitive conclusions about the prospects and outcome of a summit meeting.<sup>222</sup> In the meantime, Baghdad continued to broadcast anti-Syrian propaganda, advocating the overthrow of Assad and describing him as "the intimate ally of the enemies of Arabism and the Arab nation."<sup>223</sup> By the end of the month there were clear indications that the purpose of the meeting between Faruq al-Shara and Tariq Aziz would be to set the stage for an Assad-Saddam summit.<sup>224</sup> King Hussein, confident that the fruits of his labor would become apparent in the coming weeks, departed on a tour of several Western capitals (Paris, London and Washington) to discuss the deadlocked Middle East peace process and the emergent Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement.<sup>225</sup>

In early June, Arab League Secretary-General Chedli Klibi announced that, if the Jordanian initiative succeeded in healing the rift between Damascus and Baghdad, an Arab summit would be convened in Casablanca in July.<sup>226</sup> Concomitantly, there were reports that an Iraqi delegation had arrived in Syria to discuss the reopening of the trans-Syrian (IPC) oil pipeline, shut down since April 1982 when the Syrian-Iranian alliance was formalized.<sup>227</sup> In the days that followed, both Iraqi Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz and King Hussein officially announced that the first meeting of the foreign ministers of Iraq and Syria for ten years would be held on June 13 on their common border to pave the way for a summit meeting between Saddam Hussein and Hafez Assad, aimed at eventually ending the Gulf war and resuscitating the Arab-Israeli peace process.<sup>228</sup> The Jordanian monarch was quite confident by this stage that his mediation efforts were going to pay off, ending the state of paralysis and disunity in Arab politics. In reference to Iran's seizure of the Faw Peninsula earlier in the year and Syria's stance in this regard, he confidently asserted that: "Syria's leadership and people believe, as we do, that Arab land is sacred and must be safeguarded...that is part of the Arab interest and the Arab identity."<sup>229</sup>

### **Iran's Riposte and the Failure of Jordanian Diplomacy**

In spite of Syria's assurances that it was not about to abandon its alliance with revolutionary Iran, the political leadership in Tehran was ill at ease, since it was acutely aware of Syrian disenchantment with its refusal to resume oil shipments and lack of cooperation on a number of key issues in Lebanon, including the Amal-Hezbollah rivalry, the War of the Camps and the Western hostages. The clerical regime faced a major dilemma at this stage: while determined to prosecute the "imposed war" against Ba'thi Iraq until final victory and expand its foothold in Lebanon, it could not afford to alienate its key Arab ally, which played a critical role in maintaining the "pincer" against Iraq and allowing Iran access to the Lebanese theater. Not only were the Iranians concerned by Assad's state visit to Jordan in early May, but they became increasingly

alarmed as they witnessed Jordan's intense shuttle diplomacy as the month progressed, with growing signs of a potential Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation in the making. Initially, Tehran chose to demonstrate its deep displeasure with the Syrian-Jordanian rapprochement by inviting the leader of Syria's outlawed Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>230</sup> However, the need to retain its most valuable Arab partner, in part to prevent the formation of a united, anti-Iranian coalition (vital both in practical and ideological terms), became more imperative in the latter part of May, when Iraq launched its first major attack, on May 17, across the border since the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1980 and captured the strategically-located town of Mehran.<sup>231</sup> Baghdad's success and subsequent reports that substantial numbers of Egyptian and Jordanian troops were fighting alongside the Iraqis in the frontlines accentuated Iran's sense of regional isolation.<sup>232</sup>

Despite their differences, it is doubtful that Syria ever intended to make a clean break with its Iranian ally. The situation in the Levant necessitated mending fences with Jordan, but a re-alignment with Iraq would do very little to mitigate Syria's security concerns and further its regional interests. Following the discontinuation of Iranian oil shipments, Iraqi oil deliveries and greater financial support from the Gulf Arabs would help alleviate the economic situation in Syria, but would not enhance Syria's ability to stabilize the situation in Lebanon and facilitate its quest to be the leader of the Arab world. From Assad's perspective, a reconciliation with Saddam Hussein - whom he deeply distrusted - would have a marginal impact on Syria's ability to bolster its position in the Middle East peace process and regain the Golan Heights. Overall, in strategic terms, the Syrian leadership calculated that a breach with Iran in favor of Iraq would have minimal effect on furthering its long-term interests. A limited rapprochement with Iraq to gain material benefits from Baghdad and its allies would remedy Syria's economic woes and, in parallel, cajole Iran to modify its position and be more cooperative with Damascus.<sup>233</sup>

Even as plans were underway for the al-Shara-Aziz meeting on June 13 at the Tanaf security post on the Iraqi-Syrian border, Assad, in sharp contrast to King Hussein's assertions that the Iranian conquest of the Faw Peninsula had prompted Syria to reassess its position in the Gulf war, declared in early June that:

"We are against the occupation of any Arab land. In the Gulf War, we are against the occupation of Iraqi territory. Iran will withdraw its troops from Iraqi territory once it has attained its objectives - the overthrow of the regime in Baghdad. I am certain that Iran has no designs on any Arab territory. If the case is the contrary, we will reconsider our position. Syria discusses with Iran all dangers and difficulties that are facing the Arab conscience. This lies in the interest of the Arabs, Syria and Iran."<sup>234</sup>

In order to pre-empt a possible Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation, an Iranian delegation headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Besharati arrived in Damascus a week before the scheduled meeting between the two Ba'thi rivals. Besharati, who had been sent to patch up any differences with Syria and mediate

in the Amal-Palestinian conflict in Lebanon, held talks with the Syrian and Lebanese Shi'ite leadership. Following these deliberations, Assad stated that Syria had always been interested in the formation of "a united entity with Iraq against the Zionist entity, but the policy of the Baghdad regime, including the imposition of war on Iran, disrupted this plan."<sup>235</sup> The ties between Syria and Iran were described as "firm and strategic," with Khaddam expressing gratitude for Iran providing its good offices in Lebanon and elucidating that "Syria views the Islamic revolution of Iran as a gain not only for the Iranian nation, but for Arab nations and the Islamic liberation movement."<sup>236</sup> Besharati, having also delivered a message from Ali Khamene'i to Hafez Assad, dismissed reports about strains in the alliance and the discontinuation of oil deliveries to Syria. He underscored that Iran would continue to supply Syria with oil and give it more time to pay off its \$1.5 billion debt to Iran.<sup>237</sup> Indeed, Besharati's week-long visit to Syria and Lebanon coincided with the arrival of an Iranian oil tanker carrying at least half a million barrels of oil, believed to have been the first Iranian oil delivery since at least the end of 1985.<sup>238</sup>

In the days leading up to the meeting between Tareq Aziz and Faruq al-Shara, Baghdad did not desist from denouncing Damascus. For example, in a statement broadcast on Iraqi radio and published in the Egyptian daily, *Al-Akhabar*, on June 11, Iraqi Information Minister Latif Nassif Jasim rebuked Syria and Libya for what he described as their "betrayal of the Arab nation and their support for Iran against Iraq." Eventually, only hours before the two foreign ministers were due to meet, Jordanian sources in Amman announced that the talks had been "postponed to allow for further consultations."<sup>239</sup> There were conflicting accounts about what had actually transpired. Some Arab sources claimed that negotiations between the two had occurred, but the results had been so disastrous that the two parties and their Jordanian mediators agreed to deny their existence.<sup>240</sup> Irrespective of the veracity of these reports, the Syrian-Iraqi dialogue foundered because of Syria's refusal to abandon its strategic partnership with Iran. Damascus had insisted the talks should either be limited to economic cooperation or focus on a full-fledged political union between the two countries. In contrast, Baghdad had demanded that the issue of the Persian Gulf War and Syria's relations with Iran be included in the agenda and addressed accordingly.<sup>241</sup>

Although there were some reports in the Western and Arab press that Syria had backed down due to Iranian pressure and threats to foment unrest in Lebanon, this seems highly unlikely.<sup>242</sup> In the final analysis, it is improbable that Syria seriously considered severing its links with Iran. Instead, it saw a limited opening towards Iraq as a means of coaxing Iran towards cooperation on a number of vital issues and, in parallel, encouraging the Gulf Arabs to be more forthcoming with financial contributions. Overall, Assad was determined to preserve his partnership with Iran and concurrently exploit opportunities to obtain concessions from both sides.<sup>243</sup> Several days after the scheduled meeting failed to take place, the official Jordanian news agency, Petra, reported that the talks between the Syrian and Iraqi foreign ministers had been postponed indefinitely.<sup>244</sup>

While the resumption of oil deliveries undoubtedly provided a major incentive for Damascus to cancel the June 13 meeting, the Syrians indicated that renewed Iranian oil shipments were not enough in themselves to prevent a gradual rapprochement with Iraq. If anything, Assad was now in a better position to exploit the regional situation by demanding greater concessions from Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states in return for improved relations with Iraq.<sup>245</sup> Assad's risky gambit had paid off. Not only had he succeeded in bolstering his regional influence and prestige by prevailing upon the Iranians to resume the flow of desperately needed oil, and placing himself in a stronger position to demand more advantageous terms from the pro-Iraq camp, but with Iranian cooperation he was also able to secure the freedom of two French hostages in Beirut on June 20, thereby ingratiating himself with Paris and driving a wedge among the Western allies against the backdrop of the Hindawi affair.<sup>246</sup>

Damascus was able to maintain its leverage with Jordan and the Gulf states by still officially keeping the door open to any third-party mediation. Despite the setback in thawing Syrian-Iraqi relations, Jordan continued its rapprochement with Syria, with King Hussein commencing a new round of quiet diplomacy to bridge the gap between the Syrian and Iraqi positions.<sup>247</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the cancellation of the Syrian-Iraqi meeting, the Iraqi government intensified its attacks on the Assad regime. Tareq Aziz bitterly accused the Syrians of opportunism by trying to reap benefits from both Iran and the pro-Iraqi bloc.<sup>248</sup> He also depicted the Syrian-Iranian strategy towards the Gulf Arabs as deceptive, with Tehran threatening the Arab littoral states and Syria blackmailing them by creating an illusion of being the guarantor of their security and shielding them from "Iranian expansionism." He condemned Syria and Libya as the source of all problems in the Arab world.<sup>249</sup> The Iraqi Ba'th Party daily, *Al-Thawrah*, also advocated isolating Syria as the only viable solution.<sup>250</sup>

#### **IRAN'S ASSERTIVE ROLE ON THE REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVEL**

As the summer of 1986 progressed, Iran was not only able to revitalize its links with Syria, but also succeeded in scoring some major gains on the political and military fronts. It is interesting to note that its relations with France and the Soviet Union - Iraq's two primary arms suppliers - warmed up.

While the gradual thaw in relations with Moscow (in part due to Mikhail Gorbachev's ascent to power, and political expediency on Iran's part to prevent sliding into isolation) led to the expansion of economic cooperation between the two countries, the changes with France were more complex.

The spree of abductions in Lebanon, and the bombing campaign in France orchestrated by Iran's proxies and agents during 1985-86, forced the Mitterand government to modify its stance in the Gulf War, by agreeing to repay the \$1 billion Eurodif loan to Iran (from the Shah's era) in several tranches, expel the Iranian Mojahedin from France and extend a \$1 billion line of credit to Tehran to purchase non-sophisticated French armaments.<sup>251</sup> Iran's ability to coerce France to submit to its demands, coupled with Syrian pressure, led to the release of a number of French hostages during

the course of 1986.

The cancellation of the Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation talks and French capitulations were followed by a small, but nonetheless significant military victory on July 2, when Iran launched a counteroffensive, culminating in the recapture of Mehran after a week of heavy fighting.<sup>252</sup> As a result, Iraq's seizure of Mehran had proved to be short-lived, and earlier claims by Baghdad that the war had entered a new phase with Iraq assuming offensive operations as part of its "active defense" strategy to force Iran to the negotiating table did not seem credible. Furthermore, within 72 hours after the Iraqi defeat in Mehran, a thirty-five-man Syrian delegation led by Economics Minister Mohammed al-Imadi arrived in the Iranian capital for a week-long visit to renegotiate a series of economic and commercial agreements that had been concluded in 1982.<sup>253</sup> Among the items on the agenda was a comprehensive review of the previous bilateral oil agreement. Al-Imadi met with Iranian Prime Minister Musavi, and both concurred on the need for greater cooperation in order to confront their main enemies - Israel, Iraq and the United States. During their deliberations, Musavi emphasized that "cooperation between Syria and Iran is imperative and more urgent than ever to counter the conspiracies of the two countries' common enemies."<sup>254</sup>

After lengthy negotiations lasting more than four days, it was announced on July 9 that, under the terms of a new arrangement approved by both parties, Iran would sell 2.5 million tons of oil to Syria over a six-month period between on 1 October 1986 and the end of March 1987.<sup>255</sup> The agreement, signed by Ghazi al-Durubi and his Iranian counterpart, Gholamreza Aghazadeh, was another indication that the alliance was being reinvigorated and restored to its former status. The day after the conclusion of the accords, al-Imadi met with Iranian President Khomeini, expressing satisfaction at the outcome of the bilateral negotiations and reaffirming Syria's unswerving support for Iran's cause.<sup>256</sup>

In mid-July, both Tehran and Damascus were heartened by reports and Baghdad's own admission that purges had occurred in the Iraqi Ba'th Party and the armed forces, following a coup attempt. They both claimed that economic malaise and military setbacks had produced a severe political crisis in Iraq, whereby Saddam Hussein was more vulnerable than ever.<sup>257</sup> Indeed, Iraq was feeling the pinch economically. The Iraqis were fighting for survival and needed to take decisive measures in order to avert disaster and force Iran to accept a negotiated settlement.<sup>258</sup> However, Iran's revolutionary leadership was in no mood to compromise. While the economic conditions in Iran were noticeably deteriorating, following the victories at Faw and Mehran, and with meticulous preparations for the "final offensive" already underway, Tehran calculated that a decisive engagement in the coming months producing a major military victory would ultimately lead to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi Ba'th. Damascus' decision not to abandon its alliance with Iran and the thaw in relations with Iraq's two primary backers - the Soviet Union and France - boosted Tehran's confidence and strengthened its conviction that victory could be at hand. During July, Khomeini's special representative on the Supreme Defense Council and Majles



Speaker Rafsanjani reiterated Iran's conditions for ending the Persian Gulf War: "punishment of the aggressor or the downfall of Saddam Hussein," and \$200-300 billion in war reparations.<sup>259</sup> He also warned Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other regional states against continuing to finance the Iraqi war effort. Rafsanjani went even further by characterizing them as "reactionary" in view of their support for "Iraq's acts of wickedness," and stated that they would be held responsible and "pay for such aggressions."<sup>260</sup> The threats and vitriolic rhetoric emanating from Tehran were partly the result of reports in the Arab press that the Gulf Arabs had recently pledged Iraq \$4 billion for military expenditures.<sup>261</sup>

In parallel with the moves by the GCC states to shore up Iraq financially and economically, Jordan's King Hussein once again attempted to resuscitate the Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation process by flying to Damascus on July 26 to try to persuade Hafez Assad to resume a dialogue with Iraq. The talks between the two leaders lasted some 13 hours over a two-day period, with Assad refusing to yield, convinced that the rift with Ba'thi Iraq was irreparable. Consequently, the Jordanian monarch left Syria empty-handed on July 27.<sup>262</sup> A few days later, in an unprecedented move, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein called on Iran's leaders in an open letter to desist from further hostilities and end the six-year-old war.<sup>263</sup> Not surprisingly his offer was rebuffed by the clerical regime. Unable to turn the tide in the ground war, financially strapped, and politically on the defensive on several fronts, Baghdad escalated the air war by intensifying the bombing campaign against Iran's oil facilities.<sup>264</sup>

On August 12, Iraq conducted its first air attack against Iran's new oil loading terminal on Sirri Island (600 kilometers east of Kharg Island). The efficacy of the raid was such that operations on Sirri had to be discontinued and moved to Larak Island, 200 kilometers further east near the Straits of Hormuz. Sirri Island was beyond the normal range of Iraqi aircraft. The very fact that the Iraqi air force had managed to conduct the attack meant that its aircraft had either refuelled in the air or landed in one of the lower Gulf states during the course of their mission. Iran claimed that, based on radio communication and radar signals it had picked up, the warplanes had flown via one of the GCC states.<sup>265</sup> Majles Speaker Rafsanjani claimed that Iran had transcribed the Iraqi pilots' conversations and recorded the radar readings, proving that they had refuelled in one of the neighboring Arab countries.<sup>266</sup>

The air campaign in the weeks that followed cut Iran's oil exports by at least one-third from about 1.6 to 1.8 million b/d to somewhere between 0.8 and 1.2 million b/d.<sup>267</sup> In the aftermath of the Saudi-instigated price crash earlier in the year, the escalation of the Iraqi air campaign against the oil installations eroded Iran's already precarious economic situation even further, prompting Tehran to lash out against the Gulf states, threatening retaliation if they continued to provide aid to Baghdad. Such was the intensity of Iran's war of words against the GCC states, that at the behest of the Saudis, Syrian Foreign Minister al-Shara arrived in Tehran on August 19 to mediate and defuse tensions between Iran and its southern neighbors. Al-Shara, who was carrying a message

from Assad to his Iranian counterpart, met with President Khamene'i, Prime Minister Musavi and Deputy Foreign Minister Besharati during his one-day visit.<sup>268</sup> Al-Shara's departure coincided with heightened Iraqi aerial activity, prompting Khamene'i on August 22 directly to accuse the Gulf states of assisting Iraq's air campaign to disrupt Iran's oil exports and threaten to respond in kind if they did not desist from such actions.<sup>269</sup> At the same time, he underscored: "We don't want to expand the war. If we had wanted to, it would have expanded already to the GCC countries."<sup>270</sup> He also posited that Iran desired good relations with its southern neighbors "in spite of all we know about the help they give Iraq."<sup>271</sup> In the days that followed, Tehran once again pointed the finger directly at Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for supporting Iraq.<sup>272</sup> Alarmed by the Iranian accusations, Syrian officials continued their role as intermediaries at Riyadh's request to ensure that Iran did not widen the scope of hostilities. Subsequently, Vice-President Khaddam and Foreign Minister al-Shara were dispatched by Assad on August 22 and 23 respectively to seek clarification and prevent the expansion of the conflict.<sup>273</sup> In their meetings with Khamene'i and Musavi, they were assured that Iran did not have any intention of escalating the war to engulf the lower littoral states.<sup>274</sup>

On the eve of a Non-Aligned Movement summit in Zimbabwe, Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati and al-Shara flew to Damascus on August 24 to participate in the previously scheduled fifth tripartite meeting of the foreign ministers of Syria, Iran and Libya to review regional developments and coordinate their positions prior to attending the summit in Harare.<sup>275</sup> The talks primarily centered around the Gulf War, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Libyan-American confrontation and the agenda of the NAM summit, with the Syrians and Iranians denouncing Washington's attempts to intimidate and cow Tripoli into submission.<sup>276</sup>

Despite the relative improvement in Syrian-Iranian relations during the summer of 1986, as the year progressed, there were renewed tensions as disagreements emerged on a wide-range of issues. Their conflicting agendas in Lebanon with regard to the Amal-Hezbollah rivalry, the resumption of the "War of the Camps" and the continued captivity of the Western hostages all plunged Syrian-Iranian relations to new lows. As a result, the period between the autumn of 1986 and the summer of 1987 was one of the most troubled phases in the Syrian-Iranian alliance, with the two sides holding frequent consultations to articulate their concerns and interests, iron out their differences through mutual accommodation and compromise in order to prevent an irreparable rift and restore their relations to a normal footing.

#### **IRAN'S DIPLOMACY AND THE IMPACT OF THE IRAN-CONTRA REVELATIONS**

By the latter part of 1986 the Iranian leadership had evidently become aware that the war could not be prolonged indefinitely. War weariness at home and low oil prices on the international markets meant that the conflict could only be sustained for a limited period of time. With the price of a barrel of oil hovering around \$11-12, and export capacity fluctuating due to Iraqi raids on oil

refineries and loading terminals, Iran was only generating some \$6-8 billion in revenues during 1986.<sup>277</sup> Iran continued to mobilize its forces for a "final offensive", massing some 600,000 troops on the southern front by the end of the summer.<sup>278</sup> In early October, during the annual session of the UN General Assembly in New York, Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati stated that the Gulf conflict was approaching an end with the defeat of the "Iraqi aggressors." Having in mind a statement made earlier that week by Hafez Assad to the effect that, while Syria sided with Iran in the conflict, it would not condone the seizure of Arab territory, Velayati explained that Iran might have to overrun a substantial area of Iraq in order to achieve its ultimate objectives. However, he elucidated: "we are not going to occupy the lands of Iraq forever."<sup>279</sup> Drawing an analogy with the Allied effort to defeat Nazi Germany, he asserted that Iran would not stop the struggle until the Iraqi Ba'th had been swept away.<sup>280</sup>

While Iran's revolutionary leadership was becoming more confident that it could deal a devastating blow against Ba'thi Iraq in its next major offensive, it was also acutely aware that the conflict with Baghdad could not be pursued indefinitely. The window of opportunity to determine the outcome of the war on the battlefield would only remain open for a very limited period of time due to domestic political and economic considerations, as well as Iran's growing isolation in the Arab world. Tehran firmly believed that the Iraqi aerial attacks in the southern Persian Gulf were being aided and abetted by Riyadh and the sheikhdoms just as the Saudi-engineered oil price collapse in early 1986 had been partially motivated by their desire to deny Iran the financial resources to prosecute the war successfully. Consequently, the Islamic Republic assumed an increasingly confrontational stance both at the August OPEC meeting and during the annual Hajj that same month, in which 150,000 Iranian pilgrims participated. Demonstrations and rallies held by the Iranian pilgrims in Mecca and Medina led to clashes with Saudi security forces and over 100 arrests.<sup>281</sup> Throughout the autumn of 1986, Baghdad stepped up its aerial campaign against Iran's oil industry. Such was the intensity of the Iraqi raids that, by October, petrol rationing had to be reintroduced in Iran for the first time since the September 1980 Iraqi invasion.<sup>282</sup>

At this critical juncture, it was imperative for Iran to preserve its alliance with Syria to prevent Iraq from reaping any political, economic or strategic gains from a fissure in Syrian-Iranian relations. For the clerical regime, attaining victory over Iraq took precedence over all else. As a result, even in Lebanon, in the remaining months of 1986, while Iran did try to reconcile differences between the various Islamic and revolutionary groupings, it ultimately deferred to the Syrians whenever a conflict of interest arose. Ensuring Syrian loyalty was of paramount importance and, whenever there was an instance where their bilateral ties appeared to be in danger, Tehran would take appropriate action to prevent any rifts from occurring.

On October 8, a week after Hafez Assad's statements regarding the occupation of Arab territory by Iran and his call for "total and immediate unity" between Syria and Iraq as a means to end the war, the Minister of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Mohsen Rafiqdoust, was

dispatched to Damascus to seek clarification about Syria's position and to coordinate policy. The official purpose of the visit was described by the Syrians as "an exchange of important information."<sup>283</sup> It was reported that the fate of the American and French hostages in Lebanon was also on the agenda during Rafiqdoust's deliberations with Syrian officials.<sup>284</sup> During his week-long stay in Damascus, he met with Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara and Head of the Syrian National Security Organization Ahmed Diyab, and was received by President Assad on October 12.<sup>285</sup> Rafiqdoust subsequently stated that he had discussed the most recent developments in the Gulf theater with the Syrian President and, in a highly illuminating remark, underscored that the special relationship between Iran and Syria "has been effective in dispelling the misconception perpetuated by imperialism which attempts to depict the war as an Arab-Persian conflict and not a war against oppression. Such misconceptions seek to denigrate our just defense."<sup>286</sup> The Syrian leader also declared in an interview that he had received assurances from his Iranian allies making "it clear that they have no ambitions on Iraqi territory, will not seek to annex any Iraqi land or try to impose hegemony...we are not worried about this."<sup>287</sup>

During the latter half of November, once the Reagan administration and the Shamir government had admitted their role in the sale of arms to Iran, Baghdad and its allies intensified their attacks against Iran.<sup>288</sup> In another blow against the pro-Iranian bloc, following the conclusion of a three-day meeting of the PLO Executive Committee in early December to discuss regional issues, and renewed fighting in the refugee camps in Lebanon, PLO Chairman Arafat delivered a statement which formally condemned Iran's dealings with the United States and Israel and Syria's policies in Lebanon against the Palestinians and advocated Arab solidarity with Iraq.<sup>289</sup> Indeed, the political firestorm created by the Iran-Contra scandal - on the regional and international level - and in tandem the beginning of a new round of clashes between Palestinian fighters and the Amal militia in Lebanon prompted Tehran to resume its mediation efforts in the Lebanese quagmire once again in a bid to stop the cycle of violence. Iran was now walking a tightrope, trying to discard its tarnished image by hammering out a deal between the Palestinians and their pro-Syrian opponents in order to demonstrate its ability to play a constructive role in the Arab world and, concomitantly, further its revolutionary interests in the Levant without overstepping the bounds in the eyes of the Syrians. This was imperative at a time when it was trying to recoup its position because of the Iran-Contra controversy and also completing final preparations to launch its greatest offensive against Arab Iraq in five years.<sup>290</sup>

#### **SYRIAN MOVES TO PREVENT THE RESURGENCE OF PALESTINIAN POWER AND IRANIAN MEDIATION EFFORTS**

While Syria's troop deployment in West Beirut during the summer of 1986 stabilized the security situation in the Lebanese capital to some degree, the political impasse remained unresolved and inter-factional fighting continued intermittently. Despite Hezbollah's initial objection to the Syrian

military presence and refusal to participate in the joint security plan, Iran went along with Syrian actions as long as they did not impede Hezbollah's general activities.<sup>291</sup> The Iranians also tried to persuade their protegee not to thwart Syrian moves in the Lebanese capital, where the streets were cleared of gunmen and militia offices were closed down.<sup>292</sup>

Syria and Amal continued to be troubled, though, by the steady influx of Palestinian guerrillas into the country and Hezbollah's ability gradually to win over the hearts and minds of the Shi'ite poor in West Beirut and the outlying southern and eastern areas of the city.<sup>293</sup> By the latter part of 1986, between 6 and 9 thousand Palestinian guerrillas had returned to Lebanon by various means.<sup>294</sup> From Amal's perspective, the challenge was two-fold: the large Palestinian camps in Beirut had an increasing number of Palestinian fighters and, at same the time, the camps themselves separated Amal strongholds in West Beirut from the Shi'ite ghettos to the east and south, where Hezbollah was attracting a large following at the expense of the secular, pro-Syrian movement.<sup>295</sup>

Intent on stemming the flow of fighters and weapons to the Palestinian strongholds and turning the tide in its favor, the Amal militia attacked the Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut and the south on November 21. The fighting that ensued lasted for almost three months and marked some of the worst violence since the 1982 Israeli invasion.<sup>296</sup> In Beirut, Berri's men and the predominantly Shi'ite 6th Brigade of the Lebanese army attacked Bourj al-Barajneh, with the fighting quickly spreading to Sabra and Shatila. In the south, the Rashidiyyah camp near Tyre and the Ain El Helweh and Mieh Mieh camps on the outskirts of Sidon were also besieged.<sup>297</sup> The Palestinians put up surprisingly stiff resistance and pushed the attackers back in some instances. In southern Lebanon, Palestinian fighters captured the strategically located town of Maghdousheh on a hilltop overlooking Sidon (including Ain El Helweh, Mieh Mieh and the coastal highway to Beirut) from Amal.<sup>298</sup>

Unable to overrun the camps, Amal and its allies resorted to shelling them, thereby inflicting many civilian casualties and causing outrage in much of the Arab-Islamic world. Amal's policies were condemned not only by the mainstream Arab states, but also by Syria's closest allies, Iran and Libya.<sup>299</sup> The failure to deliver a knock-out blow to the Palestinians and to regain Maghdousheh prompted Amal and its Syrian patrons to try to find a face-saving way out of the conundrum. As consultations got underway in Damascus between Syrian, Amal and PNSF officials, members of an Iranian delegation that had been touring Syria and Lebanon since mid-November travelled to Tyre and Sidon to try to broker a ceasefire agreement.<sup>300</sup> Concomitantly, Nabih Berri met with Iranian ambassador Mohammad Hassan Akhtari in Damascus. Libya's Colonel Qadhafi also dispatched his right-hand man, Major Jallud, to try to mediate, although Amal vehemently objected to any Libyan role, arguing that only Syria and Iran could sponsor a settlement.<sup>301</sup> As tensions escalated, Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati and Revolutionary Guards Minister Rafiqdoust also arrived in Damascus on November 28 to confer with Assad and other

Syrian officials.<sup>302</sup>

By the end of November, some 500 people, many of them refugees, had been killed in the Amal-Palestinian clashes, with the combatants failing to accept a nine-point ceasefire proposal jointly drafted by Iranian, Syrian and Libyan officials.<sup>303</sup> Following the intensive efforts of Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholislam, on December 5, Amal and the PNSF agreed to a ceasefire in order to pave the way for a comprehensive agreement.<sup>304</sup> As a result, the scale of the fighting decreased considerably. However, PLO loyalists rejected the Iranian-sponsored plan and continued to engage in sporadic clashes with Amal militiamen.<sup>305</sup> In the meantime, to Damascus' consternation, PLO Chairman Arafat from his headquarters in Baghdad called for an emergency meeting of Arab League foreign ministers in early December to obtain a pan-Arab commitment for protection of the camps, with the Jordanians and Iraqis immediately signalling their readiness to participate.<sup>306</sup> Despite a brief pause, renewed hostilities broke out after a few days, again prompting Iranian negotiators to redouble their efforts to find a durable solution.<sup>307</sup> As the fighting raged on, two committees headed by a number of prominent Lebanese clergymen (Sheikh Maher Hammoud, a Sunni cleric from Sidon, Sheikh Said Shaban of Tawheed and Sheikh Hussein Fadlallah) were formed under Iranian supervision to facilitate negotiating and implementing an agreement.<sup>308</sup>

Although the death total had risen to 700 by mid-December, the intensity of the fighting eased somewhat as Iranian intermediaries made headway in bringing the positions of the rival parties closer together.<sup>309</sup> Syria and the PLO agreed in principle to underwrite an Iranian plan stipulating an immediate ceasefire, the lifting of Amal's siege of all refugee camps and a phased withdrawal of all Palestinian guerrillas from Maghdousheh, to be replaced gradually by Hezbollah and leftist militiamen.<sup>310</sup> As implementation of the terms got underway, with the arrival of Hezbollah gunmen and the evacuation of PNSF fighters from Maghdousheh, Amal insisted that it ought to regain control of the town, leading to the outbreak of violence both in Beirut and the south, with PLO loyalists rapidly moving into Maghdousheh to pre-empt an Amal takeover.<sup>311</sup> Despite this setback, the Iranians remained undeterred and continued their attempts to bring about a disengagement of the combatants and relieve the camp populations. By this stage, it had become evident that Iran's stock had risen considerably in Lebanon, as it was the only outside party that had channels of communication open to all the warring factions. It had not succeeded in ending the Amal-Palestinian conflagration, but it had greater room to maneuver and negotiate with the different parties than did Syria and Libya.

The protracted fighting had damaged Syria's image and driven it to desperate measures, pleading for Iranian and Libyan mediation. It had become quite evident by the end of 1986 that Syria could not impose its will in Lebanon, and it had to compromise and enlist the support of Iran and its Lebanese allies to restore some semblance of order and stability in the country.<sup>312</sup> Assad and Berri had clearly miscalculated and overplayed their hand in this case. Although they had

been opposed to the main thrust of Iranian and Hezbollah policies in Lebanon since 1985, they clearly preferred to enlist the latter's support and use their good offices to resolve the situation, rather than having the Arab League or pro-Iraqi states meddle and intervene in what was considered from the Syrian perspective an "internal affair."<sup>313</sup>

The "War of the Camps" during the winter of 1986-87 had the overall impact of accentuating the rise of pro-Iranian sympathies among Lebanese Shi'ites and Palestinians, with Tehran's power and influence momentarily eclipsing that of Damascus.<sup>314</sup> Amal's failure swiftly to accomplish its objectives, Syria's inability effectively to manage the crisis - to its great detriment - and consistent Iranian pressure prompted Nabih Berri to order a ceasefire as a goodwill gesture just before New Year's Eve 1987 "because of the sisterly stand of Syria and the wish of the Iranian President." Iranian emissaries also announced that Amal had agreed to lift the siege of Rashidiyyah for humanitarian reasons.<sup>315</sup> However, a series of events in the early weeks of 1987 exacerbated the situation in Lebanon, putting Iran and its Lebanese protege once again on a collision course with Syria and its surrogates.

#### **IRAN'S PREPARATIONS FOR KARBALA 5, THE BATTLE FOR BASRA AND ITS REGIONAL CONSEQUENCES**

From Tehran's perspective, in ideological terms, the need to play an activist role in Lebanon to stop the Amal-Palestinian clashes and restore some semblance of Muslim unity by protecting the rights of Palestinian refugees and re-establishing Shi'ite-Sunni harmony also had a direct bearing on its continuous efforts to dispel anti-Iranian rhetoric depicting the Gulf War as an Arab-Persian conflict. By proving its capability as a major power broker in Arab politics, it could dispel pro-Iraqi racist propaganda and partially restore its tarnished image in the immediate aftermath of the Iran-Contra revelations. In parallel with its activities in Lebanon during the winter of 1986-87, Iran finalized careful preparations that had been underway for almost two years to launch its greatest offensive since Operation Fatah al-Mobin in March 1982, in a bid to capture the port of Basra, Iraq's second largest city.<sup>316</sup>

Damascus was clearly concerned about the possible ramifications of Iran's impending assault on a major Arab city and its impact on Syria's reputation and stature in the Arab world. The humbling of Saddam Hussien and the Iraqi Ba'th Party would undoubtedly have pleased the Syrians, but the mere fact that a non-Arab country closely aligned with them would potentially fulfill this role produced a great deal of ambivalence among Syrian leaders, who were keen to uphold their pan-Arab credentials.<sup>317</sup> Another point of contention was the upcoming OIC summit scheduled to take place in Kuwait during the latter part of January 1987. While Iran had indicated its steadfast refusal to attend a gathering hosted by one of Iraq's main financial benefactors, Syria had adopted a divergent position by signalling its readiness to attend the summit meeting. Despite their differences, as a means of trying to ensure Syrian loyalty, the Iranian parliament on

December 11 approved a bill to provide one million tons of oil to Syria free of charge during the last quarter of the Persian year ending on March 20.<sup>318</sup>

### **Iran's "Final Offensive" and its Outcome**

Throughout December 1986 and early January 1987, Iran finalized preparations for its greatest offensive in five years, Karbala 5, intended to draw the Iraqis into a decisive engagement and lead to the seizure of Basra. The Iranians opted to conduct the attack in winter during inclement weather in order to minimize the impact of Iraq's air superiority and curtail its advantage in armor, due to wet and marshy terrain which made movement extremely difficult. There were also political considerations. With the OIC summit scheduled to take place in Kuwait in late January, Tehran calculated that, through intimidation and the conduct of a large-scale offensive close to the host country, the Kuwaitis could be forced to abort the meeting. As the Kuwaitis were the most vocal of the GCC states in supporting Iraq and played a vital role in the transshipment of war materiel to Iraq, Iran considered them to be de facto co-belligerents. Tehran's decision to boycott the summit was reinforced by the participation of Egyptian President Mubarak - the latter being an occurrence unprecedented since Cairo concluded the Camp David Accords in 1979.

In the days preceding the commencement of Karbala 5, Deputy Foreign Minister Besharati was dispatched to Damascus to confer with Assad and other Syrian officials on regional developments and the Kuwait summit.<sup>319</sup> There is little doubt that the Syrian leaders must have been briefed about the imminent Iranian offensive, since they were concerned about the regional repercussions of the fall of a major Arab city to a non-Arab adversary and its impact on Syria's pan-Arab credentials.

Eventually, on January 9, 1987, the "Battle for Basra" began in earnest as Iran launched a full-scale offensive to break the five Iraqi defensive arcs east of the city. It committed a total of 200,000 troops to the operation. Facing them were four Iraqi divisions and five Republican Guard brigades.<sup>320</sup> A four-pronged offensive was launched, with the Iranians starting some 30-40 miles away from their main objective. What followed in the next six to seven weeks marked some of the most brutal and bloody fighting in the history of the First Persian Gulf War. By February 22, when the Iranians carried out their last major frontal attack, they had managed to occupy 100 square kilometers, overrunning four of Iraq's defensive arcs and advancing to within six miles of Basra itself. However, these limited gains had been achieved at a frightful cost. It is conservatively estimated that at least 40,000 Iranians were killed or wounded, while Iraqi losses stood at around 10-15,000.<sup>321</sup> By this stage, the Iranian drive had been blunted. The Iranians were bled dry, having lost some of their finest infantry units and most seasoned veterans in the attack.<sup>322</sup> Consequently, Tehran issued a communiqué on February 26, announcing the end of Operation Karbala 5.<sup>323</sup> The seven-week battle represented a significant strategic victory for Iraq. Iran had not only failed to take Basra, but also suffered critical losses, including many of its best troops.



While the clerical regime tried to put on a brave face, claiming that Karbala 5 had been a success and more offensives would follow until final victory, in actuality, it had finally come to the painful realization that it was unable to defeat the Iraqis in a major engagement and humble its Ba'thi opponent. The "Battle for Basra" marked a major turning point, and the beginning of the end of the war.<sup>324</sup> Subsequently, Iran launched no more large-scale offensives against Iraq, limiting its actions only to small operations with modest objectives. As a result, Iran began to lose the initiative in the conflict, and Iraq was afforded greater room for maneuver, gradually regrouping and turning the tide of the ground war the following year.

Besides the setback on the military front, much to Tehran's chagrin, the Islamic summit conference went ahead as scheduled in Kuwait City. Despite certain misgivings and initial hesitation, Hafez Assad decided to attend the OIC meeting to prevent the risk of greater isolation in the Arab-Islamic world. His move vexed his Iranian allies, who criticized Syria's participation in the state-controlled media.<sup>325</sup> At the same time, the Syrian leader reaffirmed his stand supporting Iran in the Gulf conflict. Prior to his departure for Kuwait, he gave an interview to the Kuwaiti daily, *Al-Qabas*, where he explained that Iran had no designs on Iraqi territory and sharply criticized Baghdad for sowing the seeds of regional discord by sabotaging the Syrian-Iraqi unity talks at the beginning of the eighties and then proceeding to invade Iran. He blasted his Ba'thi rival by asserting: "Saddam Hussein wants us to alienate a nation of 45 million that rediscovered itself in Islam and wanted to confront Israel under its banner. That was a golden opportunity. The Iran of Khomeini is anti-Israel. Iran was the only country to send forces when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982."<sup>326</sup>

At this stage, Assad was treading a fine line. On one hand, he was determined to adhere to his previous policies in Lebanon and the Persian Gulf, but he deemed it necessary to make certain conciliatory gestures towards the Gulf states and in effect towards the moderate, pro-Iraqi camp to avoid becoming a complete outcast in Arab politics. With Yasser Arafat, King Hussein, Hosni Mubarak and King Hassan attending the conference, prudence dictated his participation to forestall the crystallization of a formidable Arab-Islamic bloc opposed to Syria and its regional policies. Concomitantly, by trying to take the middle ground to a certain degree, he calculated that Iran might demonstrate greater flexibility in its policies in the Levant and the Gulf in order to appease its most valuable Arab ally.<sup>327</sup>

At the outset of the Kuwait conference, Syria expressed some reservations about a draft resolution, supported by the majority of the member states, highlighting Iraq's willingness to accept a negotiated settlement and calling for the withdrawal of the combatants to their internationally-recognized borders. However, Assad eventually relented and approved the final resolution, which also called for an immediate ceasefire.<sup>328</sup> During the summit, Assad held talks with Mubarak. This was the first time he had met with an Egyptian head of state since the Camp David Accords. While the Syrians subsequently characterized the meeting between the two leaders as being devoid of

"political significance," it must have come as a severe psychological blow to the Iranian clerics, preoccupied with the greatest battle they had ever waged inside Iraq and helplessly witnessing the political consultations in Kuwait City unfold in their absence.<sup>329</sup>

Overall, the Kuwait summit marked the beginning of Egypt's formal re-entry into the Arab-Islamic fold and concomitantly exposed the shortcomings of Syria's foreign policy, leaving the self-declared standard-bearer of Arab nationalism open to charges of betrayal. As a firm supporter of Iraq in the Gulf War, a backer of the PLO and a proponent of the Jordanian-Palestinian rapprochement, Mubarak was well on the road to restoring Egypt's pan-Arab credentials. Conversely, Assad was paying dearly for continuing his alliance with non-Arab Iran and throwing his weight behind Amal in the struggle against the Palestinians in Lebanon. The Syrian leader was the only one to condemn Egypt's peace treaty with Israel in his speech at the Kuwait summit. With large-scale fighting in the Basra theater and no end in sight to the 76-month-old war, the Gulf Arabs were more than ever convinced that drastic steps needed to be taken to reverse the current situation. Mubarak's presence reinforced their conviction that an Egyptian role was necessary to restore unity among Arab ranks, maintain security in the region and tip the balance of power in their favor.<sup>330</sup>

The sense of vulnerability among the GCC states was compounded by Iranian retaliatory raids against oil tankers in the Gulf during this period, particularly those owned or chartered by Kuwait. Between December and March, 15 of the 20 Arab tankers destroyed or sunk were Kuwaiti. These events facilitated Egypt's reintegration into the Arab fold and prompted Kuwaiti requests for Moscow and Washington to reflag its tankers in subsequent months.<sup>331</sup> These developments put Iran's remaining Arab allies in an extremely awkward situation. Both Damascus and Tripoli tried to varying degrees to distance themselves from Tehran. Some Syrian officials stated on the record that they had discontinued arms shipments and facilitation of weapons procurement for Iran.<sup>332</sup> Besides the Iran-Iraq conflagration, a series of events in early 1987 relating to Lebanon, Iranian oil deliveries to Syria and Damascus' renewed dialogue with Iraq put the Syrian-Iranian alliance to the test. The first crisis was precipitated by a severe clash of interests in Lebanon.

#### **THE END OF THE "WAR OF THE CAMPS", SYRIA'S RE-ENTRY INTO BEIRUT AND ITS IMPACT ON THE SYRIA-IRAN ALLIANCE**

During the early weeks of 1987, the "War of the Camps" continued in Beirut and southern Lebanon. As in the past, Amal resumed bombardment of the Palestinian refugee camps, destroying much of Shatila and Bourj al-Barajneh by the end of January. The situation in the camps had become so critical that, according to some reports, in Bourj al-Barajneh some refugees had turned to cannibalism.<sup>333</sup> The dire conditions led the PLO guerillas in Maghdousheh finally to pull out, as a concession to Amal, and turn the village over to pro-Iranian Hezbollah and Sunni militiamen, in order to ensure that at the very least, Amal would not use the strategic heights to shell the Ein el-

Helweh camp near Sidon.<sup>334</sup>

Throughout this period, Iranian mediators pursued efforts to negotiate a ceasefire and convince Amal to lift the siege. Despite a pledge by Nabih Berri to allow humanitarian supplies to reach the camps after the Palestinian evacuation of Maghdousheh, the stalemate continued. The situation was aggravated even further on February 13, when a convoy of UNRWA trucks (carrying 16 tons of food for the inhabitants of Bourj al-Barajneh) and Iranian ambulances came under gunfire from Amal fighters as they tried to enter the camp in the presence of Iranian diplomats and Amal officials. This led to a violent exchange that resulted in the death of a Lebanese employee of the Iranian embassy and the injury of two others.<sup>335</sup> In order to defuse a potentially explosive situation, Amal relented and permitted the delivery of food and medical supplies during the next two days under the supervision of Iranian and Syrian officials.<sup>336</sup> Concurrently, in the south, Berri acceded to requests to lift the siege of Rashidiyyah for 48 hours to allow the delivery of food and medical supplies for the first time in 17 weeks. This brief respite enabled some 10,000 Palestinian refugees to stream out of the camp.<sup>337</sup>

In general, though, Amal had overplayed its hand. Its heavy-handed tactics against the Palestinians and efforts to wrest control of West Beirut away from the other militias were greatly resented, particularly by Jumblatt's Druze PSP.<sup>338</sup> The growing rivalry finally prompted Jumblatt and other left-wing groups to take decisive action. On February 15, the combined militias of the PSP, LCP, SSNP and Murabitoun attacked positions held by Amal and the 6th Brigade, leading to five days of heavy fighting. Amal and its allies suffered major losses and were pushed out of most areas they had controlled in West Beirut. Syria frantically tried to salvage Amal's position by attempting on February 18 to broker a ceasefire agreement, which was ultimately ignored.<sup>339</sup>

As the violence continued, Sunni leaders such as Prime Minister Rashid Karami and Selim al-Hoss and the Shi'ite speaker of parliament, Hussein al-Husseini, appealed for Syrian intervention to restore peace. In the meantime, Berri and Jumblatt travelled to Damascus and, after painstaking negotiations, acquiesced to handing over security matters in West Beirut to Syrian forces.<sup>340</sup> In addition, Berri announced at a press conference in Damascus that he would lift the siege of the Palestinian camps due to the positive attitude of the anti-Arafat PNSF towards Iranian and Syrian peace initiatives.<sup>341</sup> Eventually, on February 22, the Syrian 85th Brigade, reinforced by armor and other units, entered West Beirut to impose order.<sup>342</sup> The move brought a welcome sigh of relief from the population. The Syrians deployed some 7,000 troops, supported by 2,500 Lebanese soldiers transferred from the Bekaa and northern Lebanon.<sup>343</sup>

It is noteworthy that the motives behind Syria's decision to re-enter Beirut with a sizeable force after a five-year absence were multifold. First and foremost, Assad could ill afford to stand idle and watch his main Lebanese proxy be routed. In effect, the Syrian intervention saved Amal from certain defeat.<sup>344</sup> Furthermore, the Syrian leader knew that, if the moderate, secular Amal movement became a spent force, this would undoubtedly facilitate the resurgence of PLO power in

Lebanon and also enable Hezbollah to fill the void left in the Shi'ite community and radicalize it. This in turn would also allow Iran to play an even greater role in Lebanon by expanding its power and influence.<sup>345</sup> He had by this point come to the realization that employing traditional divide-and-rule tactics to achieve minimum control without cost to Syria had proven to be ineffectual. Attempting to exert indirect control through its proxies and the token force of 200 elite Syrian troops deployed in Beirut the previous July was no longer enough. Decisive steps had to be taken in order to prevent the situation from spiralling out of control and to restore some semblance of law and order.

Brigadier Ghazi Kan'an was charged with the task of implementing the nine-point Syrian plan, accepted by the Muslim Lebanese leaders, to enforce the ceasefire and disarm the militias.<sup>346</sup> Upon entry into the Lebanese capital, the Syrians took firm measures within a matter of days, controlling the streets, closing down 75 militia offices and disarming gunmen.<sup>347</sup> Those who defied them were either arrested or shot on the spot. Amal's foes in particular were treated harshly. On February 24, the Syrians escorted about 1,500 Druze PSP and Communist fighters out of the city.<sup>348</sup> However, on the same day, a grave incident occurred that could have plunged Syrian-Iranian relations into a major crisis and indeed put the alliance to one of its greatest tests in the Levant.

### **The Massacre of Hezbollah Members and Its Impact on Syrian-Iranian Relations**

By early 1987, Syria was greatly perturbed by the growing power of Hezbollah and its increasingly bold conduct - at times seemingly without the knowledge or support of its Iranian patrons. In addition, the deepening factionalism within Iranian political circles (as clearly illustrated by the Iran-Contra affair and its subsequent exposure) indicated that Tehran was not pursuing a uniform, consistent policy in Lebanon, further complicating Syrian attempts to coordinate policy on Lebanon with its Iranian partner and come to grips with the difficult situation in the war-torn country.

Even prior to the Syrian decision to re-enter West Beirut, Damascus was alarmed by a series of incidents that jeopardized its position on the regional and international level. From Damascus' standpoint, Hezbollah's intransigence and independence manifested itself in several instances. Violent clashes between Amal and Hezbollah supporters in the Lebanese capital in September 1986, and a number of subsequent confrontations pitting Syrian forces against Hezbollah in the Bekaa and Beirut between October 1986 and February 1987, aroused serious concern.<sup>349</sup>

Concurrent to these events, as Syria was trying to reassert its control in Lebanon and rectify its image after the damage caused by the Hindawi affair, the kidnapping of three Americans in Beirut between September 9 and October 21 (after a fifteen-month pause) enraged the Syrians. Although it is evident that Hezbollah was responsible for these abductions, the degree of Iranian complicity is unclear, although they may have been undertaken with the support of some of the

radical elements within the regime.<sup>350</sup> However, the situation reached a critical point in early 1987 when Hezbollah kidnapped eight more Westerners (four Americans, two Germans, one Frenchman and the special envoy of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Terry Waite). Syria was incensed by Hezbollah's reckless actions, and grew more determined to take drastic measures, even if it meant direct military intervention to restore order and curb the power and influence of Hezbollah. The final straw was the disappearance of Anglican Church envoy Terry Waite, on January 20, when he set out to negotiate with Hezbollah members (using the cover name "Islamic Jihad") to secure the release of two American hostages. The incident prompted Syrian, Iranian and Druze emissaries to shuttle back and forth between Damascus and Beirut, in a flurry of behind-the-scenes activity to determine the fate and whereabouts of the Briton.<sup>351</sup>

The combination of all these factors hardened Syrian resolve to check the ascendancy and activities of Hezbollah, or at the very least, certain aspects that proved to be to the detriment of Syrian interests in Lebanon and ran contrary to Damascus' efforts to cast off the stigma of the Hindawi affair and improve relations with the West. Another important indicator of Assad's determination to assert his authority and curb the power of religious extremists was the fact that he reassigned three officers from the Syrian Special Forces, Colonels Hisham al-Mouallaq, Ali Deeb and Abdul-Hamid Sultan (who had played a pivotal role in the crushing of the Hama insurrection in March 1982) and their units to the Lebanese capital. The presence of the three men, noted for their brutal efficiency and loyalty to the Syrian Ba'th, was a clear sign of Damascus' commitment and determination - both in political and military terms - to achieve control. Stern warnings were also issued to the Shi'ite community through local clerics that, if any of the Western hostages were killed by their captors, "the severest possible punishment" would be meted out.<sup>352</sup>

Consequently, within 48 hours of the Syrian entry into West Beirut, an incident occurred that initially threatened to pit the Syrians in an open confrontation with Hezbollah and plunge Syrian-Iranian relations into a major crisis. On February 24, when Syrian troops entered the Basta district of West Beirut, a Hezbollah stronghold, they reacted in a heavy-handed manner when they encountered resistance during their deployment. After a gunman opened fire and wounded a soldier in the leg, Syrian troops stormed a three-story building that housed the local Hezbollah headquarters, known as the Fathallah barracks.<sup>353</sup> Initial reports indicated that in the ensuing melee, some 20 Hezbollah militiamen were killed, but as the dust settled, a different picture of the incident emerged.<sup>354</sup>

It was subsequently revealed that the Hezbollah personnel had given themselves up and peacefully handed over the Fathallah barracks to the Syrians. However, a group of them were rounded up, with their hands tied, lined up against a wall and shot. In all, 23 Hezbollah militiamen and five women were slain. Afterwards, those who still remained alive were knifed to death. This was confirmed by witnesses in the area and medical staff who examined the bodies later at a Beirut hospital.<sup>355</sup> While the Syrians justified their action as legitimate self-defense in order to

restore law and order, Hezbollah refuted these claims, describing it as "an act of liquidation."<sup>356</sup> The movement issued a communiqué accusing Damascus of "deliberately massacring" its members, with some militants vowing revenge.<sup>357</sup> The next day, as a sign of solidarity and outrage among the Shi'ite community, the funeral procession in the southern suburbs of Beirut for the dead drew more than 10,000 mourners as some chanted "Death to Syria."<sup>358</sup> Hezbollah fighters were also placed on high alert in case the Syrians tried to enter the southern neighborhoods and clamp down on them.<sup>359</sup> Prominent Shi'ite clerics spoke in unison against the Syrian action, with Sheikh Fadlallah condemning what he called the "massacre" perpetrated by the Syrians, and Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli accusing Damascus of conspiring with Israel and demanding an apology.<sup>360</sup>

The Syrian army for its part expressed no regret about the incident, and signalled its determination to stay its course. In fact, following the killings, at midnight on February 24, Ghazi Kan'an issued a statement to the effect that every gunman was "an enemy of the city," and his forces would "not discriminate" between members of any organization carrying weapons.<sup>361</sup> The next day, Damascus announced that those who resisted the efforts of its forces to halt the violence and chaos would pay dearly, urging Lebanese to turn their guns away from each other since the violence was only "serving the interests of Israel." Through their robust presence in West Beirut, the Syrians put an end to the looting and disorder. As a way of showing who the masters were in West Beirut, Syrian soldiers proceeded to take down portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini that had been placed in the streets and replace them with those of Hafez Assad.<sup>362</sup>

### **Iran's Reaction to the Basta Incident**

The overall reaction of Tehran to the Basta affair was cautious and restrained. There is no doubt that the Syrian decision to enter West Beirut, and the killing of Hezbollah personnel two days later, caught the Iranian government off guard. As recently as February 20, Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholislam had returned to Tehran after a three-month mission in Lebanon to facilitate efforts to end the siege of the camps.<sup>363</sup> The day after Syrian forces entered West Beirut, Foreign Minister Velayati and Revolutionary Guards Minister Rafiqdoust hastily departed for Damascus to seek clarification about Syrian motives and subsequently received assurances that Hezbollah would not be suppressed.<sup>364</sup> Their one-day visit, which included a meeting with Assad, was cloaked in secrecy, and they departed without any formal statements. During their deliberations, it seems Assad made it perfectly clear to his Iranian allies that they would have to defer to him in determining the course of events in Lebanon and understand that, in the Levant, Syrian interests were paramount.<sup>365</sup> Upon arrival in Tehran, Velayati publicly cautioned the Syrians to be careful about their moves in Lebanon and, on a defiant note declared: "no other country in the world has as much influence in Lebanon as Iran."<sup>366</sup> In reality, the Iranian leadership was acutely aware that, if Assad deemed it necessary, there was very little the Islamic Republic could do to prevent him from crushing its Lebanese followers. In any case, with Operation Karbala 5 still in full swing, Iran's

revolutionaries knew now more than ever before that their main priority lay in the successful prosecution of the Gulf war. Lebanon was a sideshow and did not constitute their primary interest, especially at this critical stage.

Subsequent to the Basta affair, the official Iranian reaction was to express disapproval of the Syrian action, but refrain from holding the Syrian regime responsible for the incident.<sup>367</sup> This was reflected repeatedly in the statements of government officials and in the state-controlled news media. Prime Minister Musavi went so far as to denounce the killings as an act that only benefitted the "cause of imperialism."<sup>368</sup> Rafsanjani also advised both the Syrians and Hezbollah to avoid confrontation, since that would serve Israel's interests. He described the Basta massacre as "bitter," and emphasized that the "friendship" between Damascus and Hezbollah "should be preserved."<sup>369</sup> The day after the clash, the Persian-language daily *Kayhan* claimed that the incident had been an unfortunate mistake caused by ill-disciplined Syrian soldiers. It added that Syria knew perfectly well that Hezbollah was a force to be reckoned with, and Iran would not accept its being weakened or sidelined.<sup>370</sup> A few days later, another major daily, *Ettela'at*, exonerated the Syrian regime by explaining: "without doubt, this action was not consistent with the political and military command instructions of Damascus, and it smacks of a plot hatched by an errant group in the military..."<sup>371</sup> Overall, Tehran refrained from pinning the blame on the Assad regime and conveniently attributed the killings to renegades within the Syrian army. It demanded that those responsible be identified and brought swiftly to justice to prevent a similar recurrence in the future.<sup>372</sup>

Some of the more hardline figures in Iran's political-religious hierarchy such as Ayatollah Montazeri and Interior Minister Mohtashami were more outspoken in their condemnation of the Basta killings, but again, fell short of holding Damascus responsible. Montazeri appealed for reconciliation and unity among all Lebanese, Palestinians, Syrians, Sunnis and Shi'ites.<sup>373</sup> In general, most of the Iranian leadership viewed the Syrian military presence in West Beirut with great skepticism, with some fearing that the imposition of a Pax Syriana at the expense of Iranian influence had the implicit backing of Washington and Tel Aviv. Consequently, in the days that followed, Tehran took steps to ensure that there would be no further moves against Hezbollah and convince Syria that any hostile action targeting its Lebanese acolytes would be interpreted as an attack on Iran.

In parallel, after some initial outbursts lashing out at Syria, the Hezbollah leadership adopted stern measures (perhaps in consultation with the Iranian government) to ease tensions and contain the situation. It issued a fatwa (religious edict) ordering its followers to avoid confrontations with the Syrians.<sup>374</sup> Furthermore, in the days that followed, many of its members withdrew from West Beirut to the southern suburbs, while those who remained or entered the city maintained a low profile. Concurrent to these steps, Fadlallah went out of his way to dismiss reports about an imminent showdown with the Syrian forces.<sup>375</sup>

While exercising restraint to prevent further friction with its Arab ally, Iran tried to bolster its negotiating position vis-à-vis Syria and in tandem boost Hezbollah's morale and confidence in its Iranian patron by highlighting the strong bond between Tehran and its Lebanese protege. To emphasize that the two were inseparable and any move against Hezbollah would be interpreted as a direct assault on Iranian interests, the clerical regime dispatched a new ambassador, Ahmad Dastmalchian, to Lebanon in early March. Moreover, he was accompanied by a high-ranking delegation composed of two ayatollahs and two hojjatolislams representing Ayatollah Khomeini and his successor-designate.<sup>376</sup> The Iranian delegation received a rapturous welcome as thousands of Hezbollah supporters and Shi'ites from southern Beirut came out to greet them. One of their first moves was to visit the cemetery where the Basta victims were buried and pay tribute to them. Dastmalchian called the killings a "hideous and inexcusable crime."<sup>377</sup> Later, they visited the Basta district and met with the families of the fallen. One of the Iranian delegates, Ayatollah Jannati, tried to convey the message that Iran and Hezbollah were inextricably linked, by stressing that the Islamic Republic valued all its combatants equally, be it "on the battlefields of the Iraqi-imposed war, or in the war front against the Zionists."<sup>378</sup> At the same time, while showering praise on Hezbollah for its valiant efforts against Israel, France and the United States, the Iranians tried to discourage their Lebanese followers from taking any retaliatory actions against Syria by urging patience and prudence. Jannati articulated this by declaring: "Revenge belongs to Allah. Your patience in this phase will merit Allah's best reward...victory is the ally of patience."<sup>379</sup>

Concurrent with the Iranian initiative in Lebanon, the leadership in Tehran decided to send an envoy to Damascus to ascertain Syrian intentions in both the Levant and the Gulf and try to reach some sort of modus vivendi on both fronts with its Arab ally. In view of the Syrian deployment in West Beirut and the Basta incident, Tehran was concerned that Assad was now striking an independent path in Lebanon and also seemed to be reconsidering his position on the Iran-Iraq conflict. Only two days after the Syrian-Hezbollah clash, he delivered a speech warning his Iranian allies that, if Basra was overrun, the Arab world would unite against them.<sup>380</sup>

Thus, in conjunction with Dastmalchian's arrival in Lebanon, on March 6, Interior Minister Mohtashami was sent to Syria on an unscheduled three-day visit.<sup>381</sup> Mohtashami met with his Syrian counterpart, Mohammed Ghabbash, the following day to discuss their "bilateral relations and matters of mutual concern" and reaffirmed Iranian support for Syria's goals and aspirations.<sup>382</sup>

On March 8, Mohtashami was finally granted an audience with Assad, delivering a message from Ali Khamene'i and holding three hours of talks on developments in Lebanon.<sup>383</sup> According to reports, the Syrian leader assured him that he had no intention of disarming Hezbollah and was aware of its crucial role in thwarting Western and Israeli designs in the past. In addition, he underscored that the killing of the Hezbollah members had not been a pre-meditated act. Assad apparently said that Hezbollah would be permitted to operate against the Israelis in the south, and Syrian troops would not move into Beirut's southern suburbs.<sup>384</sup> On the other hand, he told



Mohtashami that no activity running contrary to Syrian interests would be tolerated, and he expected both Tehran and Hezbollah to cooperate in this respect.<sup>385</sup> In effect, if Iranian-Hezbollah interests diverged from those of Syria, the latter would take precedence in Damascus' Lebanese backyard. Hafez Assad made sure he drove home his point when, on the same day that Mohtashami returned to Tehran, in an address at Damascus University commemorating the 24th anniversary of the 1963 Ba'thi Revolution, he reiterated the primacy of Syrian interests in Lebanon, elucidating: "A solution will not come from overseas, or from anywhere outside the borders of Lebanon and Syria...those who are against imperialism and Zionism must go along with Syria, appreciate Syria's direction in Lebanon and respect and support that direction."<sup>386</sup> He also expressed his desire for the Lebanese themselves to put aside their differences and reach national accord to restore peace in their country. Assad signalled his readiness "to extend all possible help" towards this end.<sup>387</sup>

In an interview upon his return to Iran, Mohtashami expressed satisfaction with the outcome of his talks since he had been able to ascertain Syria's position and reach an understanding on strengthening bilateral relations and Hezbollah's future role.<sup>388</sup> Mohtashami stressed that forging closer links with Syria was "a must."<sup>389</sup> On the whole, initial Iranian fears that Syria intended to break with its non-Arab ally had proved to be unfounded. From the Iranian perspective, maintaining Hezbollah as an armed resistance movement, directing its attention to the struggle against the Israeli occupation in the south and the continuation of the alliance against Iraq by far outweighed entertaining notions of establishing an Islamic republic in Lebanon and jeopardizing the strategic partnership with Syria.<sup>390</sup> It therefore came as no surprise that, on March 13, during the Friday sermon at Tehran University, Speaker of Parliament Rafsanjani declared that Damascus had no intention of standing in Hezbollah's way. He depicted Syria as the "strongest bastion of resistance against Israel," that had succeeded in the vital task of establishing relative peace in Lebanon through its military presence.<sup>391</sup> The Syrian-Iranian alliance had survived the crisis caused by the Basta affair. Assad had succeeded in dictating the rules of the game in Lebanon and the parameters of Iranian-Hezbollah activities.<sup>392</sup> The partnership had survived an important test. However, it was to face further challenges in the months that followed.

#### **OTHER AREAS OF CONTENTION, AND THE IMPACT OF THIRD PARTY EFFORTS TO MEND THE SYRIAN-IRAQI RIFT**

Syria and Iran had managed to reach a *modus vivendi* on Lebanon - at least for the time being. Although Assad had persuaded his Iranian ally that Syrian interests took precedence in his bailiwick, by no means did this mean that he could dispense with its support or indeed Hezbollah's in Lebanon's fractious political landscape. As a major movement that was rallying a growing number of supporters among the Shi'ite community, Hezbollah was a force that Syria aimed to coopt and accommodate as far as possible. This was imperative in view of the fact that Damascus

faced opposition to its policies in the Christian and Palestinian camps. Furthermore, Syria's dilemma was exacerbated since its own ally, Amal, was experiencing an internal crisis and beginning to disintegrate. Several of its key members who had become disenchanted with Berri's policies were either dismissed or had defected. Amal had been badly mauled in the latest round of fighting in Beirut, while in the south, many of its fighters were joining Hezbollah. Corruption within the ranks of Amal and its brutal tactics alienated many young Shi'ites, who turned to its pro-Iranian rival for inspiration.<sup>393</sup>

In addition to the precarious situation in Lebanon, there were other formidable challenges facing Damascus that necessitated diversifying its relations and showing flexibility in its dealings with the moderate Arab camp. The acute economic crisis which had plagued Syria since 1985 was continuing to take a severe toll on the country, forcing Assad again to rethink strategy and become more amenable to Arab and Soviet entreaties to mend fences with Iraq and the PLO. (See next section on the impact of Gorbachev's new thinking on Syrian foreign policy in the Middle East.) A steadily declining GDP, shrinking foreign currency reserves and the inability to finance its current accounts deficit meant that, from late 1986 onwards, Syria was forced to reduce defense expenditures, disband military units and mothball heavy equipment.<sup>394</sup> Assad's cherished goal of achieving "strategic parity" with Israel was looking ever more elusive. It also continued to have problems making timely payments for Iranian oil shipments. In fact, due to financial constraints, Syria took one million tons of free Iranian oil and only purchased at most one-fifth of the amount that it was entitled to buy at a 25% discount under the previous arrangement. By March 1987, a month before the expiry of the agreement, it had accumulated a total debt of approximately \$1.7-2.3 billion.<sup>395</sup> Kuwait, in the meantime, had stepped in and made up for the shortfall. Other reports at the time indicated that Syria was also receiving Libyan oil and purchasing additional supplies on the Black Sea spot market.<sup>396</sup>

During the early months of 1987, Syria tried to accommodate the moderate, pro-Iraqi bloc as a means of alleviating some of the economic hardship it was facing and lessening its political isolation in the Arab-Islamic world: hence, Assad's decision to attend the OIC summit in Kuwait and condemn Iranian moves to occupy Basra. King Hussein of Jordan attempted to exploit this new window of opportunity to bring Syria back into the Arab mainstream and heal the Syrian-Iraqi rift. The Jordanian monarch had already met with Hafez Assad during the Kuwait meeting on January 28.<sup>397</sup> One week after the end of the OIC conference, King Hussein travelled to Damascus and held talks with Assad over a two-day period on regional issues and bilateral ties.<sup>398</sup> This initiative coincided with renewed Soviet efforts to bridge the gap between Syria and Iraq. Moscow welcomed the Syrian-Jordanian reconciliation process and its support for an international peace conference on the Middle East as a means to restore order in the Arab world, diminish prospects for the implementation of any American proposal resembling the Reagan Plan and enhance Soviet influence and standing in the region.<sup>399</sup> In addition, the Soviets were strong advocates of a Syrian-

PLO rapprochement, in order to create a unified Arab position in the Middle East peace process.<sup>400</sup>

In parallel with Soviet efforts to resuscitate the Arab-Israeli negotiations, Moscow also aimed to end the Gulf War, since it considered the conflict detrimental to bolstering prospects for a resolution to the Arab-Israeli problem. Furthermore, it viewed the Iran-Iraq hostilities as providing the US with a pretext to increase its presence and influence in the Gulf region.<sup>401</sup> Overall, there was a significant convergence of interests between Jordanian and Soviet moves during this period to bring about a Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation in order to restore unity in Arab ranks, isolate Iran and force the clerical regime to sue for peace. Interestingly, in mid-February, as the fighting raged on the outskirts of Basra, Iraqi Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz was dispatched by Saddam Hussein to Moscow and Amman to hold talks with Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Andrei Gromyko and King Hussein on the war and bilateral affairs.<sup>402</sup> This was followed by a one-day visit to Baghdad by King Hussein on March 8 for consultations with the Iraqi leader.<sup>403</sup>

Assad, for his part, had no intention of abandoning his strategic partnership with Iran, since he was still receiving shipments of Iranian oil and needed Tehran's good offices to control Hezbollah and steer events in Lebanon. In addition, his nemesis, Saddam Hussein, continued to be tied down in a desperate struggle for survival against the Iranians. However, he calculated that he needed to take certain tactical measures to mitigate his regional isolation and security dilemma and in tandem extract financial and material benefits from both sides in order to contain the economic crisis at home. Such an opportunity arose in April 1987 due to the confluence of several events. With the previous oil agreement scheduled to expire in April, Iran delivered its last major load of crude oil (some 260,000 tons) to Syria in early March and stated that renewal of the agreement would be contingent on Syria's ability to settle its outstanding debt.<sup>404</sup> Jordan and Saudi Arabia intensified their efforts to persuade Syria to abandon Iran through proposals for the resumption of Iraqi oil shipments as part of a Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation, and for Saudi oil and financial support to compensate it for the termination of Iranian oil deliveries and repayment of its foreign debts. Consequently, on April 3, King Hussein arrived in Damascus on an unscheduled visit and held a seven-hour meeting with Hafez Assad on regional developments, including inter-Arab politics and the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>405</sup> At the same time, the Syrian leader was scheduled to travel on a state visit to Moscow in late April - his first since June 1985 - to meet Mikhail Gorbachev and boost bilateral cooperation. With Syrian-Iranian relations now on seemingly shaky ground, and Syria facing a myriad of political and economic problems at home and abroad, Moscow, Amman and Riyadh believed that they could induce Damascus to finally abandon its alliance with Iran in favor of Iraq, thereby restoring Arab unity and dealing a major blow to Iran - both in symbolic and practical terms - leaving revolutionary Iran isolated in the region and ideologically bankrupt, without any supporters in the Arab East.

## **Gorbachev's New Thinking, Syrian-Soviet Relations and Their Impact on the Syrian-Iranian Alliance**

The Syrians had been quite concerned about the new directions in Soviet foreign policy since Mikhail Gorbachev took power in March 1985. Like his predecessor, Chernenko, not only did he seem less sympathetic to Syrian concerns, but he also adopted a new orientation in the Kremlin's Middle East policy to make new inroads in the region and lessen Moscow's dependency on traditional allies such as Syria. Furthermore, from Damascus' perspective, an extremely worrisome aspect of Gorbachev's new approach lay in his overtures towards Israel.<sup>406</sup>

Predictably, the first meeting between Gorbachev and Assad, during the latter's visit to Moscow in June 1985, did not go well. On almost every issue, the two men did not see eye to eye. The Soviet premier expressed reservations about supporting the Syrian doctrine of "strategic parity" with Israel, emphasizing the need for diplomatic solutions. Furthermore, he disapproved of Assad's hostile stance towards Yasser Arafat and Saddam Hussein, underscoring the need for Arab unity and a coordinated approach on the Gulf War and the Arab-Israeli problem. Although Hafez Assad received a rude awakening and came away empty-handed from these talks, he maintained his previous course. Moreover, this did not lead to a rupture in Soviet-Syrian relations.<sup>407</sup>

By the spring of 1987, in view of the plethora of domestic and external problems he was facing, Assad knew that he would have to demonstrate flexibility and comply with some Soviet demands when he embarked on his second state visit to the Soviet Union to meet with Gorbachev. From Assad's standpoint, his negotiations in Moscow (April 23-25) went quite well - in fact better than could have been expected when one considers the dire straits Syria was in at this juncture.<sup>408</sup> He was able to secure desperately needed assistance in return for a few concessions. A number of economic and industrial agreements were concluded, entailing Soviet assistance in the development of Syria's oil and phosphate industries and construction of a hydro-electric dam on the Euphrates River. Gorbachev agreed to reschedule Syria's \$15 billion debt and to deliver weaponry that had been promised, including MiG-29's.<sup>409</sup> Assad acceded to Gorbachev's request that he hold a secret meeting with Saddam Hussein in Jordan to iron out their differences, upon his return to the Middle East, and publicly reaffirmed his support for an international conference, with Soviet participation, to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute in a comprehensive manner.<sup>410</sup>

At the same time, it should be pointed out that, in spite of his political and economic woes, Assad took an unusually hard line on certain issues.<sup>411</sup> The Syrian leader brushed off Soviet criticism of his quest to attain "strategic parity" with Israel and Gorbachev's insistence on pursuing only a diplomatic option. Assad, who was a firm believer in negotiating from a position of strength, pointed out that the increasing levels of US aid to Israel enabled Tel Aviv to be more intransigent and less amenable to compromise in peace talks, particularly when the Soviet Union was showing reluctance to aid its Arab allies.<sup>412</sup>

Overall, the cooling of Soviet-Syrian relations produced a gradual reformulation of Syrian

foreign policy, including its means and objectives. The diminished likelihood of matching Israel in terms of conventional weapons meant that Syria would have to rely less on its Superpower patron for assistance and instead enlist the support of regional states such as Iran and local actors such as radical Lebanese and Palestinian groups to attain its objectives. Herein lay another important reason to avoid alienating the emergent Hezbollah movement in Lebanon. As long as the radical Shi'ites did not prove to be an obstacle to Syrian policy, the Western hostage issue and the guerrilla warfare in the south, targeting the Israelis and SLA, could further Syrian objectives. This, in turn, necessitated maintaining cordial relations with Iran to keep Hezbollah in line and also explore further avenues of cooperation with Iran in the Gulf region.

### **The Syrian-Iraqi Dialogue and Iran's Riposte**

Immediately following his departure from Moscow on April 25, Assad travelled the next day to Jordan to hold secret talks with Saddam Hussein.<sup>413</sup> In view of the acute economic crisis at home and the volatile situation in the region, coupled with intense lobbying and pressure from Moscow, Amman and Riyadh, the Syrian leader decided that he had nothing to lose by meeting with his Iraqi Ba'thi rival.<sup>414</sup> Quite to the contrary, the occasion provided Syria with a convenient opportunity possibly to extract concessions from the pro-Iraqi camp and in tandem gain greater leverage over Iran through some delicate diplomatic maneuvering and posturing.

The Syrian and Iraqi presidents conducted their negotiations over a two-day period (April 26-27) in the town of Jafra (situated near an air base) in the northeastern corner of the Jordanian panhandle close to the junction with the Syrian-Iraqi border.<sup>415</sup> The opening round was also attended by King Hussein and Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah.<sup>416</sup> The deliberations on the second day only involved the two Ba'thi leaders and their personal aides, and lasted five hours. One of the major sticking points was Saddam Hussein's insistence that a genuine reconciliation between the two would require at minimum Syrian neutrality in the Gulf War.<sup>417</sup> Although no major breakthrough occurred, the two sides agreed to take gradual steps to scale down hostilities and explore possible avenues of cooperation in a number of areas as a means of building confidence and thawing relations. It was decided that they would both curtail the activities of exiled opposition groups based in their countries and the propaganda wars directed against one another.<sup>418</sup> They also agreed to desist from further activities to destabilize each other and free political prisoners loyal to the other side. In addition, both parties agreed to convene a meeting of their oil ministers to discuss the possibility of reopening the IPC oil pipeline closed in 1982 and form joint committees to discuss various issues, including utilization of the Euphrates' waters and harmonization of their positions vis-à-vis Turkey in this regard.<sup>419</sup>

In general, the Syrian-Iraqi summit (the first of its kind between the two leaders since the collapse of the 1979 unity talks) represented a considerable achievement for King Hussein and underlined the efficacy of Saudi and Soviet lobbying.<sup>420</sup> The outcome of the bilateral talks at the

time seemed to have laid the foundations of a genuine rapprochement and heralded a new phase in Damascus-Baghdad ties. Confident that they had finally succeeded in weaning Syria away from Iran, the Saudis leaked details about the outcome of the meeting to the Arab press that were subsequently picked up and publicized in the Western news media.<sup>421</sup> Besides Jordan and Saudi Arabia serving as intermediaries, it was evident that the Soviets had played an instrumental role in persuading Assad to meet with his rival.

In actuality, Assad's gambit paid off. The meeting and the subsequent revelations about it created expectations for a Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement, with the moderate Arab camp providing inducements to Damascus to facilitate the process, and a flurry of activity on Iran's part to ensure it would not be abandoned by its most important Arab ally. For the next few months, the Syrians proved to be quite adept at exploiting the new conditions that had emerged as a result of the Jafra summit.<sup>422</sup>

While Iran must have been aware that Syria was under immense pressure from the Soviet Union and key Arab states to terminate their alliance and to realign itself with the moderate, pro-Iraqi bloc, it was still surprised by the Syrian-Iraqi talks. Indeed, only days before Assad departed for Moscow, Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholislam had been in Damascus to confer with Faruq al-Shara on regional developments and the Gulf War, with al-Shara reaffirming Syrian support for Iran.<sup>423</sup> During Assad's visit to Moscow, Syrian Oil Minister Ghazi al-Durubi arrived in Tehran to negotiate a new oil agreement with Iran. Due to Syria's economic plight and political considerations, Iran seems to have backpeddled on its previous position and agreed to supply oil, despite Damascus' outstanding debt. As it turned out, a new 12-month agreement was concluded between al-Durubi and his Iranian counterpart, Gholamreza Aghazadeh, on April 25, whereby Iran would continue to deliver one million tons of crude free of charge and sell some 1.5-2.5 million tons at a 25% discount.<sup>424</sup>

Within a week after details of the Jafra summit were leaked to the press, Faruq al-Shara was dispatched to Tehran to brief the Iranian leadership on the outcome of the Syrian-Iraqi talks and reassure them that Damascus was not contemplating a major policy shift on the Iran-Iraq issue. Al-Shara arrived on May 12 for a one-day visit. He first met with President Khamene'i, delivering a message from Assad.<sup>425</sup> He asserted that "despite all efforts undertaken in Baghdad...Syria will stand by the Islamic revolution of Iran..." Khamene'i, for his part, emphasized the need for continued expansion of bilateral relations.<sup>426</sup> Al-Shara then proceeded to meetings with Prime Minister Musavi and Speaker of Parliament Rafsanjani before departing for Syria later that day. One of the topics of discussion during his deliberations with Rafsanjani was the Syrian-Soviet summit. Rafsanjani expressed frustration with Moscow's Middle East policy, stressing that the most important impediment to improved Soviet-Iranian relations was the Kremlin's continued support for Iraq.<sup>427</sup> At Tehran's Mehrabad airport where he was seen off by Foreign Minister Velayati, when asked by a reporter about the Syrian-Iraqi negotiations, al-Shara gave an elusive

response, stating: "If you mean how Iran-Syria relations are, I should say that these relations are firm and steadfast. In relation with international issues, our stand is quite obvious."<sup>428</sup>

By now, Tehran and Damascus both realized that on the local, regional, and international level, developments were not moving in their favor. For Syria, mounting domestic problems, the fluid situation in Lebanon and the gradual cooling of relations with the Soviet Union meant that it would have to engage in a careful balancing act on the regional stage to safeguard its interests. There was no question about severing links with Iran. However, Syria's growing marginalization in inter-Arab politics, and the gradual return of Egypt to the Arab fold, necessitated greater flexibility in its regional diplomacy.

As far as Iran's clerical regime was concerned, the preservation of the alliance with Syria became imperative in the months that followed. Tehran found itself increasingly isolated in the Arab-Islamic world as the year progressed.<sup>429</sup> However, the revelations about the Iran-Contra affair, the failure of Karbala 5 and the reflagging operations by the two Superpowers contributed to the radicalization of Iranian politics and enabled extremists to gain the upper hand. Coupled with the hardening of American and Western European attitudes towards Iran in the first half of 1987, the more pragmatic elements within the Iranian leadership had to retreat from their previous policies and assume a hardline posture in order to safeguard their own position and prove their revolutionary credentials.<sup>430</sup> Iran's growing isolation was also underscored by incidents that led to the marked deterioration of relations with two key Western European countries, Britain and France.<sup>431</sup>

These developments led to a downward spiral in Iran's fortunes. In fact, Tehran gradually resorted to acts of recklessness and desperation in the Gulf region and beyond over the next year, eliciting decisive responses from regional and extra-regional actors, especially the two Superpowers, that paradoxically guaranteed the survival of Saddam Hussein. By mid-1987, Iran had begun to embark on a self-destructive path that would condemn it to regional and international isolation and provide the United States with a convenient pretext to become in effect a de facto co-belligerent in the Gulf conflict on the side of Iraq. Tehran's ill-conceived strategies, misjudged conduct and maladroit diplomacy sealed its fate. They ensured that it would fail to attain its objectives in war and also become the target of Arab and Western opprobrium.

In sharp contrast to its Syrian partner, where prudence, careful calculation and realistic objectives were a hallmark of Damascus' foreign policy, revolutionary Iran once again tried to thrive on an evolving crisis to gain short-term benefits without regard to long-term interests and formulation of attainable goals. As in the past, style and form were deemed more important than substance and solid accomplishments. Beginning in the spring of 1987, within a matter of a few months, Iran had alienated key Western and Arab states as a result of its brinkmanship and reckless conduct. Whether intentional or not, Tehran committed a crucial mistake by trying to take on the US (and the Soviet Union initially) in its backyard - albeit indirectly - by planting mines in the

shipping lanes of the Gulf during the summer. Its determination to take action and challenge the foreign navies in the Persian Gulf was reinforced by the stalemate in the ground war.<sup>432</sup>

### **SUPERPOWER DIPLOMACY AND IRANIAN-SYRIAN REACTIONS TO THE FOREIGN NAVAL PRESENCE IN THE GULF**

Throughout the spring of 1987, both the US and Soviet Union engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity in the Gulf to pave the way for implementation of the reflagging agreements. As part of this initiative, it was announced that Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Petrovsky would tour the region to hold talks in Iraq, Kuwait, Oman and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>433</sup> Petrovsky's visit to the region in late April, where he also met with Saddam Hussein and Tareq Aziz in Baghdad, coincided with the Gorbachev-Assad summit.<sup>434</sup> The fact that the two Ba'thi rivals met with Soviet officials just prior to the clandestine meeting in Jafra was not a mere coincidence. Gorbachev was determined to use all possible means to bring about a Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement in order to restore unity in Arab ranks and force Iran to accept a negotiated settlement.<sup>435</sup>

Syria avoided criticism of Soviet moves in the Gulf, but joined in the chorus of Iranian condemnation of US policy. Both the Syrian and Iranian state-controlled media denounced the visit of US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy to the Gulf region just a week after Petrovsky's trip. In a scathing editorial published in the Syrian daily *Al-Thawrah* on May 8, entitled "A Tour of Deception and Dupery," Murphy's tour of Iraq and the six GCC states was described as a ploy on the part of Washington to exploit the tense situation that had arisen as a result of Iraq's aggressive policies to increase US military forces in the Gulf and act provocatively against the littoral states.<sup>436</sup> Furthermore, an editorial in the Iranian daily *Jomhuri Eslami* on May 11 called Murphy's mission a sign of "desperate" US actions in the aftermath of the Iran-Contra revelations. Another article in the same newspaper the following day scoffed at Murphy's assertions that a Kuwaiti ship flying the American flag would not be considered Kuwaiti. It underscored: "No matter what flag it shows, a Kuwaiti ship will be considered a Kuwaiti ship and cannot serve the Baghdad regime and the war criminals ruling over Iraq. It cannot be allowed to be actively involved in strengthening the enemy's military might."<sup>437</sup>

Despite the polemical nature of Syrian and Iranian statements concerning the purpose of Murphy's tour, they were not far from the truth. The US Assistant Secretary of State visited Baghdad on May 10-11, where he first met with Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz to discuss US-Iraqi relations, the regional situation and the Gulf War. The next day, he held talks with Saddam Hussein and submitted a written note from Ronald Reagan to the Iraqi leader. His visit came at a critical time, in view of the US decision to reflag the Kuwaiti tankers and the fact that he was the most senior US official to visit Iraq since the Iran-Contra scandal. In order to restore Iraqi confidence in the US and prove the administration's commitment to end the war on terms favorable to Iraq, he informed the Iraqi leadership that the US would soon introduce a resolution in the UN



Security Council favoring Iraq. The resolution would spell out terms disadvantageous to Iran, urging the two parties in the Gulf conflict to cease hostilities and withdraw to their internationally-recognized borders - meaning Iran would have to give up all the territorial gains it had made in Iraq since 1982. To give the resolution teeth, any party that refused to abide by it would be subject to an international weapons embargo. Naturally, Baghdad was expected to accept the resolution, while Iran would reject it. Overall, the reflagging effort and the UN resolution were part of an overall package of American plans and assistance to prove that Iran-Contra had been an aberration in US policy and that Washington was now going to use all possible tools at its disposal to cow Iran.<sup>438</sup> At a press conference before departing from Baghdad, Murphy posited that "understanding had prevailed in his talks without exception."<sup>439</sup> The growing momentum of US activity in the Gulf to prop up Iraq and rally the Gulf Arabs was such that even the inadvertent Iraqi attack on the *USS Stark* - just six days after Murphy's meeting with Saddam Hussein - had minimal impact, if any, on Washington's relations with Baghdad.

As the Reagan administration increasingly assumed a war footing against Tehran, Moscow took substantive steps to defuse tensions with its southern neighbor and curry favor to the extent possible. Two factors facilitated this endeavor. Firstly, both Soviet and Iranian policymakers wanted to prevent an American military buildup in the Gulf, fearing that it might be a prelude to a permanent deployment in the area. Secondly, Gorbachev was concerned that the Reagan administration's new initiative in the Gulf was aimed at patching up US-Arab relations in the aftermath of the Iran-Contra scandal and in tandem impeding Soviet efforts to cultivate ties with the Gulf states. Numerous statements made by US officials at the time clearly indicated that the purpose of a high-profile presence of US forces in the Persian Gulf was to thwart Iranian and Soviet power and influence. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy candidly pointed out that the purpose of the US presence was to prevent the encroachment of Iran and the Soviet Union in a region vital to the West, while Ronald Reagan pledged publicly on May 30 that "the use of the vital sea lanes of the Persian Gulf will not be dictated by the Iranians. These lanes will not be allowed to come under the control of the Soviet Union."<sup>440</sup>

The Soviet-Iranian rapprochement gained further momentum with the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 598 on July 20, 1987. Although the unanimously approved resolution called for an immediate ceasefire and the release of POWs, several important articles that had been inserted reflected the success of Soviet diplomacy in avoiding the passage of a resolution with a distinctly anti-Iranian slant, as the US-Arab bloc had desired. Resolution 598 requested the Secretary-General to mediate between the two belligerents and called upon other countries to avoid actions that could exacerbate the situation. (According to the exact wording in the text, to "refrain from any act which may lead to further escalation and widening of the conflict.") As a result, Moscow subsequently accused Washington of aggravating conditions in the Gulf by sending in a large armada. Moreover, to show Iran their willingness to assume a more even-handed

position in the war, the Soviets managed in the Security Council debate to push through another article calling for the creation of an impartial body under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General to determine responsibility for the outbreak of the conflict.<sup>441</sup>

Since the resolution partially accommodated some Iranian demands, Tehran's response was not an outright rejection, but it made its acceptance contingent upon certain changes, most important of all, that the formal ceasefire and identification of the aggressor occur concurrently. In contrast to the Iraqi position that the resolution must be accepted as an "integral and indivisible whole," Iran's reservations concerned the sequence of its implementation.<sup>442</sup> The US-Arab bloc interpreted the Iranian riposte as stonewalling and urged the Security Council to impose a worldwide arms embargo on Iran. Iraq and other states, including the US, introduced a draft resolution to this effect, but the Soviets stifled their efforts by arguing the Secretary-General should be given time to resolve the outstanding issues with Iran.<sup>443</sup> While there is no doubt that the Kremlin was trying to take full advantage of emerging US-Iranian tensions in the Gulf to thaw relations with the clerical regime, it was attempting to adopt a more balanced position on the Gulf War in view of the fact that, unlike Washington, it had channels of communication open to both belligerents. Just as Syria maintained links with Iran and pro-Iraqi Arab states to enhance its regional power and status, and also to obtain benefits from the two sides, similarly, the Soviet Union found it advantageous to engage both camps diplomatically in order to bolster its influence and status in the Middle East.

Subsequent to the subtle shift in Soviet policy in the summer of 1987 with regard to the Iran-Iraq conflagration, Moscow's stance remained quite consistent for the next year until the war ended in August 1988. It attempted to improve relations with Iran in a bid to persuade its leadership to accept a negotiated settlement and deny Washington further grounds to boost its military presence and political influence in the Persian Gulf. However, Soviet efforts came to naught. Tehran's insistence on fighting until victory, or a negotiated settlement on its terms, diminished the prospects for a Soviet-Iranian rapprochement as Gorbachev continued the flow of arms to Saddam Hussein to forestall an Iraqi collapse. Ultimately, the US effort to punish Iran, by drafting a resolution unacceptable to it, weakened the position of pragmatist elements in Tehran (who desired a negotiated settlement that would identify the aggressor in the conflict) and strengthened the hand of the radicals, who were bent on pursuing the military option. Ironically, Washington's determination to give Iran no quarter and close off all possible avenues towards a political settlement bolstered the position of hardliners in Tehran and prolonged the conflict.<sup>444</sup> The continuation of the hostilities for another year gave the US the opportunity to make itself indispensable to the security of the Gulf Arabs and expand its foothold in the region, just as Moscow had feared.

In the final analysis, revolutionary Iran's futile efforts to vanquish Iraq impeded the normalization of relations with the Kremlin and in tandem enabled the US to intervene effectively in

the Gulf arena to deny it any hope of victory. Tehran subsequently furnished the Reagan administration with a convenient pretext to seek direct military confrontation by laying mines in the Gulf, naively thinking that the US would not respond to its actions decisively. The Iranians not only committed grave miscalculations in their strategy to prosecute the war, but also made a number of other serious mistakes that brought greater opprobrium, severely straining their relations with the Arab world. By July 1987, Iran's long slide towards isolation and eventual defeat was becoming distinctly recognizable - epitomized by the *Bridgetown* and Mecca incidents.

#### **ARAB DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS TO DECOUPLE SYRIA AND IRAN**

In parallel with Iran's increasing isolation and its determination to meet the emergent challenge in the Persian Gulf, throughout the remainder of the spring and summer of 1987, moderate Arab states and the West tried to engage Syria diplomatically to convince it to distance itself from its Iranian ally. On May 12, the same day that al-Shara visited Tehran to brief the Iranian leadership about the Syrian-Iraqi summit and reaffirm Syria's commitment to their longstanding alliance, King Hussein began a new diplomatic initiative to reinvigorate the Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation process and restore Arab unity, in a bid to bolster prospects for an international peace conference. He first travelled to Egypt for consultations with Hosni Mubarak; the next day he proceeded to Baghdad and later to Damascus to meet with the leaders of both states in order to mend the rift between the two Ba'thi rivals.<sup>445</sup>

In spite of the assurances they had received from al-Shara, the Iranians remained somewhat suspicious of Syrian motives; they were apprehensive due to their own growing isolation and persistent efforts by Arab and Western governments to wean Damascus away from them. A subsequent meeting between al-Shara and his Iraqi counterpart Tareq Aziz fuelled their concerns about the imminent demise of their partnership with Syria.<sup>446</sup> In the backdrop of the Superpower intervention in the Gulf and the marked deterioration of its relations with Britain, France and much of the Arab world, the Islamic Republic embarked on an intensive campaign to salvage its remaining links with key Arab and Western states between May and July.<sup>447</sup> Tehran adopted a three-track approach to stave off isolation and mend fences with other states. It dispatched envoys to Syria, the Gulf and Western Europe to contain the damage that had already been done and head off any further moves aimed at isolating it. In late May, Iranian ambassador to Syria Mohammad Hassan Akhtari met with Faruq al-Shara, handing him a message from Ali Khamene'i for Hafez Assad, reiterating Iranian support for Syria's struggle in the Levant.<sup>448</sup> This was followed up less than a week later by the visit of an Iranian delegation headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholislam, which met with President Assad and Prime Minister al-Kasm. Both sides concurred that the US deployment in the Gulf constituted a threat to regional stability, and Sheikholislam condemned the assassination of Lebanon's pro-Syrian Prime Minister, Rashid Karami, which had occurred just prior to his arrival on June 1.<sup>449</sup> Later at a press conference, Sheikholislam

expressed regret that certain Gulf states were pursuing policies indicating that their own security and the advancement of US and Iraqi interests in the region were inextricably linked. He emphasized that "there will be security in the Persian Gulf for all littoral states, or for none."<sup>450</sup> Sheikholislam's deliberations in Damascus coincided with the visit of another Iranian delegation to West Germany and Italy, led by Deputy Foreign Minister for International and Economic Affairs Mohammad Javad Larijani, and that of a third team touring the Gulf sheikhdoms to reassure them of Iranian intentions as the escalating spiral of tensions continued in the area.<sup>451</sup>

Throughout the summer of 1987, there were frequent contacts between high-level Syrian and Iranian officials that produced a number of agreements and the expansion of bilateral relations. Iran was undoubtedly concerned about the ongoing Syrian-Iraqi dialogue, that led to meetings between Khaddam and Tareq Aziz in May, and al-Shara and his Iraqi counterpart in June.<sup>452</sup> Reports in the Arab press at the time hinted that these talks were preparing the way for another summit meeting between Assad and Saddam Hussein.<sup>453</sup> A high-level Iranian delegation headed by Mohsen Rafiqdoust visited Damascus during the latter part of June. The ostensible purpose of Rafiqdoust's trip was to seek clarification about the recent Syrian-Iraqi talks and strengthen bilateral ties with Damascus. At a press conference in Damascus following his initial consultations, he claimed that reports of a Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation were "baseless speculation and lies."<sup>454</sup> He emphasized that the strategic alliance between Tehran and Damascus remained intact, and Syria was not about to abandon it for one with "a weak and dying regime."<sup>455</sup> The negotiations also involved their respective ministers for finance and economics and led to the conclusion of a bilateral agreement to further develop cooperation in commercial, industrial, banking and technological affairs.<sup>456</sup>

The diplomatic tug-of-war to win over Syria continued unabated as King Hussein commenced a new round of shuttle diplomacy to facilitate a Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement. Following on the heels of Rafiqdoust's departure, the Jordanian monarch arrived on June 24 (for the seventh time since 1985) in Damascus, where he was greeted at the airport by Assad.<sup>457</sup> His visit also coincided with a mission undertaken by Kuwait's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Saud Mohammed al-Usaymi, to Syria and Jordan to seek support for Kuwait's position in the Gulf War. Al-Usaymi held consultations with both Assad and King Hussein. The Jordanian monarch subsequently affirmed that Jordan and Kuwait would coordinate their policies to restore unity in Arab ranks.<sup>458</sup> Alarmed by King Hussein's renewed attempts to bridge the gap between Damascus and Baghdad and in conjunction, Kuwait's initiative to win Syrian support for its stance in the Gulf conflict, Tehran announced that it was preparing to send Prime Minister Musavi at the head of a 40-member delegation to Damascus to expand and consolidate bilateral relations.<sup>459</sup> King Hussein followed up his deliberations with Assad by flying to Baghdad on June 30 for talks with Saddam Hussein, which the Jordanian media characterized as part of "persistent efforts to achieve Arab solidarity" and in preparation for a Syrian-Iraqi summit meeting.<sup>460</sup>

Throughout this period, rumors of an imminent meeting between Assad and Saddam Hussein persisted. Reports to this effect appeared on numerous occasions in the Arab and Western press.<sup>461</sup> The postponement of Musavi's visit to Syria only fuelled such speculation.<sup>462</sup> To dissipate Iranian concerns and dispel rumors about a Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation, Faruq al-Shara arrived in Tehran unexpectedly on July 12 to brief the Iranian leadership on Syrian moves and coordinate their policies. Meeting first with his Iranian counterpart, he pledged Syria's continued support for Iran in prosecuting the Gulf War.<sup>463</sup> At the same time, hoping to enlist Iranian support, al-Shara expressed disappointment with the turn of events in Lebanon (including the kidnapping of American journalist Charles Glass by Hezbollah) and emphasized that the need to secure the release of Western hostages was of paramount importance to Syria.<sup>464</sup> Furthermore, during his two-and-a-half hour meeting with Velayati, al-Shara condemned the American and foreign naval presence in the Persian Gulf, underlining that "this would only electrify the atmosphere and spread the war."<sup>465</sup> The next day, he held consultations with President Khamene'i for over two hours, clarifying Syria's stance on various regional issues. Besides downplaying the prospects of reconciliation with Iraq as a direct result of Jordanian mediation, al-Shara also allayed Iranian fears about the Kuwaiti initiative, cautioning: "It will be better for Kuwait to remain neutral in the war, otherwise it might be crushed by the tension created by itself."<sup>466</sup> Subsequent to their deliberations, Khamene'i confidently declared: "Fortunately, our Syrian brothers have always proved that they are strongly committed to the expansion and deepening of relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is something resented by colonialism and world imperialism."<sup>467</sup>

Besides al-Shara's visit, once US reflagging operations commenced in earnest on July 22, the Syrian media stepped up their criticism of American policy in the Gulf, stating that it reflected Washington's "dreams of domination." The move was explained as part of long-held aspirations "to dominate the entire Gulf region" that were reinforced by the loss of their main pillar in the area, the Shah of Iran. Damascus claimed that Washington was using freedom of navigation as an excuse to justify its intervention on behalf of Iraq.<sup>468</sup>

In concurrence with Syria's renewed pledge to back Iran, Syrian-Iraqi tensions rose considerably when a Syrian MiG-21 fighter aircraft was shot down over Iraqi airspace by Iraqi air-defense units on July 28.<sup>469</sup> In spite of Syrian denials, Baghdad claimed that the warplane had been on a "combat mission."<sup>470</sup> The MiG pilot was captured alive, but according to *Al-Qadisiyah*, Saddam Hussein had instructed that he should not be referred to as a prisoner, perhaps to salvage prospects for a reconciliation with Damascus. Nonetheless, the incident caused mutual recriminations.<sup>471</sup>

As Iran's foes in the West and Arab world multiplied, Tehran's revolutionary clerics aggravated conditions by trying to raise the stakes during the Hajj season. Enraged by Kuwaiti and Saudi moves to bring foreign powers into the fray and facilitate their activities in the Persian Gulf, Iran on July 31 committed a colossal blunder in the holy city of Mecca that affirmed its pariah

status in the eyes of many in the Middle East and beyond, and proved to be a godsend to the pro-Iraqi camp. Concomitantly, Syria played its most crucial role ever - probably since the early months of the Gulf War - in standing up for its Iranian ally in various regional fora and preventing its total isolation.

### **THE MECCA INCIDENT AND THE EFFICACY OF SYRIAN DIPLOMACY**

As previously mentioned, the Iran-Contra revelations not only prompted the Reagan administration to adopt a more hardline policy towards Iran to restore its credibility in the eyes of Iraq and the Gulf states, but also enabled the radical elements in the Iranian regime to regain the initiative, with the pragmatists forced to follow their lead in order to ensure their own political survival. The radicalization of Iranian politics from late 1987 onward ushered in a new phase in Iranian foreign policy. Political radicalization on the domestic level, combined with immense frustration due to the inability to score a decisive victory in the land war and outrage at the conduct of Iraq's Gulf Arab supporters by inviting the US and Soviet navies into what Iran considered *mare nostrum*, led to the adoption of aggressive and militant policies by Tehran to confront an ever more formidable coalition of Western and Arab forces arrayed against it. The growing sense of embattlement, desperation and paranoia led Iran to take a desperate gamble at the height of the Hajj season in the holy city of Mecca.

With some 150,000 Iranian pilgrims performing the Hajj at that time, Iran now tried to intimidate the Saudis and drive a wedge between them and the US. Given the Saudi royals' sensitivities about their relations with the West and their potential vulnerability as "Guardian of the Holy Places," Tehran hoped that, by organizing massive pro-Iranian demonstrations in Mecca, it could conduct a political tour de force to unnerve Riyadh and force it to cease cooperation with the US and pro-Iraqi camp. On July 31, as on several other occasions in previous years, a large demonstration was organized by Iranian cadres involving sizeable numbers of pilgrims who chanted anti-American and pro-Iranian slogans. However, this time they began to advance on the Grand Mosque, where they were barred from entering the complex by Saudi National Guardsmen and police. Clashes erupted as the Iranians attempted to break through the line of Saudi security personnel, with some of them using knives and other instruments, including perhaps some handguns. After initial attempts to disperse the mob with tear gas and other non-lethal means, at least some of the Saudi forces used firearms against the Iranians. In the ensuing melee, over 400 people were killed and some 650 others injured. Among the dead were 275 Iranians and 85 Saudi security personnel. Both sides subsequently made some false claims. Tehran stated that Riyadh had provoked the incident, while the Saudis flatly denied that their forces had fired any shots.<sup>472</sup>

Revolutionary Iran's gambit failed miserably. Rather than forcing the Saudis to perform a volte face, it backfired by plunging relations between the two countries to unprecedented lows. More worrisome for the clerical regime, both in practical and ideological terms, was the fact that

the events in Mecca produced a new Arab-Iranian schism and created a widespread impression in the Arab world that Iran's brand of Islamic fundamentalism was heretical and knew no bounds.<sup>473</sup>

With tensions in the Gulf already at an all time high, the Mecca incident sent shockwaves throughout the region, threatening to destabilize the situation even further. It led to intense diplomatic activity on both sides to buttress their respective positions, and to keep the other side on the defensive. Iran continued to accuse Saudi Arabia of instigating the violent clashes and tried to rally the few Arab allies in had - particularly Syria - behind it. The pro-Saudi bloc redoubled its efforts to isolate Iran and persuade Syria to change its allegiance. Damascus, for its part, finding itself in an awkward and sensitive position, still tried to mediate between the two sides to defuse tensions and mend the damage done to Arab-Iranian relations. For the next three months, until an Arab League summit meeting was finally convened in Amman during early November, there was a great deal of shuttle diplomacy and political maneuvering undertaken by both camps to advance their own agenda.

Less than 24 hours after the Mecca incident, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholislam left for Damascus, where he met with Hafez Assad immediately upon arrival to discuss the crisis and submitted a message from Ali Khamene'i.<sup>474</sup> Sheikholislam remained in the Syrian capital for several days to confer with other high-ranking officials, including Vice-President Khaddam and Foreign Minister al-Shara, and to devise a strategy to deal effectively with this severe crisis in Arab-Iranian relations.<sup>475</sup> As a result of their deliberations, the Syrians and Iranians seemed to have agreed to adopt separate, but complementary, strategies to deal with the fallout. Tehran was reassured of Damascus' unswerving support and initiated efforts to win the support of neighboring Arab and Muslim states, while the Syrians chose to mediate between the two sides and discourage Arab countries from shunning Iran. On August 2, the day after the Assad-Sheikholislam meeting, the Syrian leader called King Fahd, expressing deep regret about the situation and, according to Saudi sources describing the conduct of the Iranian pilgrims as "unacceptable from any quarter."<sup>476</sup> In concurrence with his attempt to mollify the Saudis, he submitted a message to his Iranian counterpart, Ali Khamene'i, asking Tehran to tone down its anti-Saudi rhetoric and ease tensions with Riyadh.<sup>477</sup> It is noteworthy that Syrian officials refrained from making any public statements about the Mecca incident, and the state-controlled media avoided criticism of Iran in the whole affair.<sup>478</sup>

The Syrians were aware of their delicate position as the only party that had channels of communication open with both Tehran and Riyadh. Moreover, the two antagonists now demanded Damascus' support against the other. However, as it enjoyed important political links, and was the recipient of economic and financial benefits from both countries, it was loath to alienate either one completely. While deciding to maintain its alliance with Iran, Syria tried to assuage the concerns of the Gulf states about further Iranian subversion and adventurism. Syria could not afford to jump ship and bandwagon with the mainstream Arab states such as Egypt and Iraq - its two main rivals

in the Arab world - who were trying to take full advantage of the Mecca incident for their own purposes. Iraq tried to portray it as a proof of Iranian hypocrisy and expansionism in the Arab world. Saddam Hussein stated it demonstrated that: "even when the Iranian rulers say they have a religion, it is not the Islamic religion."<sup>479</sup> The Egyptians also tried to get full mileage by condemning Iran's actions as "an ugly crime against Islam." Hosni Mubarak appealed for an emergency OIC summit meeting to discuss the issue.<sup>480</sup> Consequently, the Syrians were quite conscious that, if they sided entirely with Riyadh, Iraq's position in the Gulf War and the reintegration of Egypt into the Arab world would be boosted. The most logical option was to try and defuse the crisis by diplomacy, thereby impeding Iraqi and Egyptian moves to exploit the crisis, without abandoning the alliance with Iran.

As part of the joint Syrian-Iranian diplomatic offensive, and in order to allay the fears of Arab states and prevent the crystallization of a solid Arab bloc against it, Tehran endeavored to bolster relations with Arab states which were not blatantly pro-Iraqi, or somewhat sympathetic towards Iran. On August 5, Sheikh Islam arrived in Abu Dhabi, where he met with UAE President Sheikh Zayid bin Sultan Al-Nuhayan to discuss the crisis in Saudi-Iranian relations and delivered a message from Ali Khamene'i. In parallel, another Iranian envoy, Ali Shams-Ardakani, went on a similar mission to Muscat, where he was received by Sultan Qaboos.<sup>481</sup>

On August 5, Faruq al-Shara visited Tehran to reaffirm Syrian support for its ally and coordinate policy. During his one-day visit, he held talks with his Iranian counterpart and the prime minister and delivered a note from Hafez Assad to Ali Khamene'i. Although al-Shara denied press reports that his presence in the Iranian capital was part of a Syrian initiative to mediate between Riyadh and Tehran, he was careful not to criticize Saudi Arabia.<sup>482</sup> Instead, he expressed regret about the tragic events in Mecca and accused Washington of having been involved in the affair, in order to exacerbate the Gulf Arab-Iranian rift and legitimize its high-profile naval presence in the area.<sup>483</sup> Besides underscoring Syrian solidarity with Iran, he stated: "I am confident that the Islamic Republic of Iran is capable of preventing the aggressors from achieving their aims and, just as US plans have been faced with defeat in the past, they will face defeat in the future too...US and Arab reaction wish to spread the war and turn it into an Arab-Persian war, but the Islamic Republic of Iran has managed to defeat that conspiracy."<sup>484</sup> In the aftermath of al-Shara's visit, close communication was maintained between the two sides as the pro-Saudi camp accelerated efforts to mobilize support to punish Iran's intransigence by isolating it.<sup>485</sup> To show support for Iran and exert indirect pressure on the Gulf Arabs to prevent them from throwing their weight behind the US, the Syrian media intensified their propaganda campaign against the US naval presence in the Gulf region. Washington's moves were depicted as an effort to acquire direct control of the "Arab oil lake," by using the need to protect tankers and ensure freedom of navigation as a pretext. It accused the Reagan administration of "reckless, aggressive behavior" to impose its hegemony.<sup>486</sup>

As expected, the Arab diplomatic offensive to isolate Iran got underway rapidly in the days



following the tragic events in Mecca, with Tunisia leading the call for an emergency meeting of the Arab League Council. Initially, Kuwait was designated to host the meeting on August 15, but the need for additional preparatory consultations and scheduling problems led to the postponement of the gathering until the 23rd, with the venue being shifted away from the Gulf to Tunisia. The delay was engineered by UAE President Sheikh Zayid in a last-ditch effort to buy time and, along with the Syrians and Algerians, to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran. He also agreed with Jordan to follow up on its previous initiative to bridge the gap between Damascus and Baghdad.<sup>487</sup> The UAE President arrived in Damascus on August 16 and prolonged his stay in the Syrian capital to negotiate with Hafez Assad, thus heightening expectations for a possible solution.<sup>488</sup> In parallel with his deliberations in Damascus, Sheikh Zayid had dispatched an envoy to Baghdad to confer with Saddam Hussein. However, hopes of a breakthrough were dashed, as no substantive progress was achieved and Iraq rejected the UAE mediation attempt.<sup>489</sup> Consequently, the stage was set for a major confrontation in the three-day Arab League meeting that commenced on August 23, with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait spearheading a drive to ostracize Iran, and Syria at the forefront of efforts to thwart them.

#### **Syria's Role in the Arab League Foreign Ministers' Meeting and Its Implications for Inter-Arab Politics**

The convening of the Arab League foreign ministers' meeting in Tunis represented a major milestone in Arab-Iranian relations during the 1980's, and its outcome had the most profound impact on the evolution of inter-Arab politics since the expulsion of Egypt from the Arab fold in 1979. The deliberations in Tunis clearly demonstrated Syria's ability to be a spoiler by preventing the emergence of a pan-Arab consensus on a decisive riposte to the Mecca affair - something that Damascus was unwilling to countenance. With Egypt's continued absence from the Arab League, and Iraq still locked in a desperate struggle for survival against Iran, Syria was by default the key player in Arab affairs and held enormous sway. Its ability during the proceedings, despite overwhelming support from the majority of members, to prevent the passage of a harsh anti-Iranian resolution underscored the urgent need for a major policy shift by the League with regard to Egypt, in order to tip the scale and dilute Syrian power and influence in Arab and regional politics. In many respects, the Tunis conference and Iran's continued refusal to accept UN Security Council Resolution 598 unconditionally paved the way for the Amman summit three months later, where the stage was set for Egypt's formal re-entry into the Arab fold, and Iran was unanimously condemned.

Against the backdrop of the seven-year-old Gulf War and the potential threat that the hostilities could engulf other neighboring states, the events in Mecca provided tremendous impetus to general Arab disillusionment with Iran and underscored the need to signal intense displeasure with its conduct. On the eve of the Tunis meeting, the Syrians were well aware that they now

would have to be at the vanguard of efforts to prevent the crystallization of a pan-Arab consensus against Iran. Already there were suggestions that Saudi Arabia would propose the revival of the 1950 Arab Defense Pact, stipulating that aggression against any Arab League member would be construed as a threat against all its members - thereby enabling the Gulf states and others to back Iraq overtly.<sup>490</sup> In addition, with the recent passage of Resolution 598 by the UN Security Council, it was apparent that the anti-Iranian camp would try to build on the momentum it had generated, by threatening punitive measures against Tehran unless it complied with the UN resolution.<sup>491</sup> Prior to the opening session, the Syrians, led by Faruq al-Shara, convened a meeting in Tunis with the participation of the Libyan, Algerian and South Yemeni representatives to harmonize their positions.<sup>492</sup>

Upon his arrival in Tunis on August 22, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, who was to chair the emergency session, stated that he would press for severance of relations with Iran, in view of its "anti-Arab actions."<sup>493</sup> It was quite apparent that Saudi Arabia would assume a maximalist position in order to rally the other members, put any potential dissenters on the defensive and come away from the meeting with tangible gains. In a ferocious attack against Iran, in his opening speech, Saud al-Faisal denounced Iran's "terrorist and destructive actions against the Arab and Islamic worlds, particularly its neighbors in the Gulf."<sup>494</sup> He went on to advocate a unified Arab position since Iran was bent on continuing the war at any cost, even by destabilizing the region. He also blamed Iran for laying mines in the Gulf, intervening unnecessarily in Lebanon and maintaining ties with Israel while "hiding behind the slogans of Islam."<sup>495</sup> His words were echoed by Arab League Secretary-General Chedli Klibi, who condemned Iran for attempting to expand the war and destabilize its Arab neighbors, urging it instead to reconsider its policies and accept UN Security Council Resolution 598.<sup>496</sup>

The opening speeches set the tone for subsequent statements by the other participants, as the overwhelming majority, including Libya, Algeria and South Yemen, expressed solidarity with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and signalled their displeasure with Iranian conduct in Mecca.<sup>497</sup> Only Syria remained unwavering in its support of Iran and criticized the efforts of the pro-Iraqi camp to depict the Gulf conflict as an Arab-Iranian war.<sup>498</sup> Al-Shara fought off intense pressure from the Saudis and their allies to abandon the alliance, arguing it was vital not to isolate Iran, but to maintain open channels of communication with Tehran in order to modify its behavior.<sup>499</sup> In fact, the Syrian foreign minister was outspoken in his criticism of Iraq for starting the hostilities and condemnation of the foreign naval presence in the Gulf.<sup>500</sup> His words elicited a harsh response from his Iraqi counterpart, Tareq Aziz, who caustically retorted that the Syrian voice being heard in the session was "a Persian voice rather than an Arab one."<sup>501</sup>

While most of the delegates voiced their outrage against Iranian behavior, not all favored taking an overtly anti-Iranian position. A draft resolution calling for the severance of diplomatic ties with Iran was backed by some 15 out of the 21 delegations present.<sup>502</sup> Libya, Algeria, Oman and

the UAE supported Syrian arguments that completely ostracizing Iran would only exacerbate the situation, and prove to be counterproductive in the long run.<sup>503</sup> Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq and Tunisia led the effort to push through the draft resolution, but al-Shara would have none of it. The Syrians mustered the necessary support and thwarted this initiative. The delegates worked late into the night on the second day, modifying and watering down the text, until the Syrians grudgingly gave their consent.<sup>504</sup> The final resolution was unanimously passed on the last day of the emergency meeting, August 25, with some minor reservations.

Overall, it represented the strongest position the Arab League had ever taken on the Gulf War, reflecting its concern about the continuation of the conflict, possible expansion of the fighting and Iranian efforts to destabilize other neighboring Arab states. Although the final draft did not exclude a possible rupture in Arab-Iranian relations, it gave Iran until September 20 to reconsider its position and accept UN Security Council Resolution 598. Thereafter, the Arab League Council would reconvene to formulate an appropriate response. The resolution reaffirmed Arab solidarity "with Iraq in its legitimate defense of its sovereignty and territorial integrity," and condemned Iranian "acts of sabotage and anarchy" in Mecca. It also appealed to the UN Security Council to adopt urgent measures to ensure Iranian compliance with Resolution 598.<sup>505</sup>

Despite the harsh wording of this essentially anti-Iranian resolution, in reality the Syrians had succeeded in their endeavor to defang it. The issue of a rupture in Arab-Iranian relations had been shelved momentarily, and another proposal calling on the UN Security Council to impose an international arms embargo on Iran was also dropped from the final text.<sup>506</sup> Consequently the resolution lacked punch, with Jordanian Foreign Minister al-Masri forthrightly describing it as "incomplete." The Saudis tried to put on a brave face by declaring the meeting to be a success and describing the final resolution as "balanced."<sup>507</sup> The Iranian media welcomed the outcome of the Arab League deliberations, praising the "realism and independence" of the pro-Iranian bloc led by Syria for thwarting this US-backed "conspiracy" against Iran.<sup>508</sup> At a press conference on August 26, Prime Minister Musavi underscored the close nature of relations between Syria and Iran, mentioning that Syria had prevented the misrepresentation of the Gulf conflict as one between Arabs and non-Arabs.<sup>509</sup>

The failure of the mainstream Arab states to achieve their aims in Tunis prompted them to mobilize themselves effectively, in order to prevent being outmaneuvered by the Syrians once again, and intensify their efforts to decouple Syria and Iran and punish Iranian intransigence. Although Damascus had pulled off a diplomatic coup that it savored and was greatly appreciated in Tehran, it would prove to be a short-term gain only. Furthermore, in the remaining months of 1987, a combination of the continuing of the Gulf War, clashes between US and Iranian forces, and periodic Iranian attacks against Kuwait provided major impetus to the hardening of the Arab position against Iran and the re-entry of Egypt into the Arab fold, in effect eclipsing Syrian power and influence in the Arab world.

### **Arab Strategy Against the Syrian-Iranian Alliance in the Aftermath of Tunis**

In the weeks prior to the September 20 deadline set by the Arab League, the mainstream Arab bloc, led by Saudi Arabia and Jordan, adopted a two-track approach to bring about the demise of the Tehran-Damascus axis by trying to pull Syria into their camp and concomitantly depict the Gulf War as a continuation of the historical struggle between Arabs and Persians. Amman and Riyadh hoped that Assad would eventually yield and drop his backing for Tehran, as more and more Arab states distanced themselves from Iran and the Arab propaganda war against the Iranians reached unprecedented levels.

Even prior to the commencement of the Tunis conference, King Hussein dispatched Prime Minister al-Rifai to Damascus on August 22, to press the Syrian leader to reconsider his position in light of recent events.<sup>510</sup> In addition, a week after the conclusion of the deliberations in Tunis, the Jordanian monarch made an unscheduled visit to Damascus (his second in four months) in an effort to persuade Assad to settle differences with Saddam Hussein.<sup>511</sup> As in the past, the Syrians would not be swayed, but concurred on the need to prevent the Gulf War from spreading to the southern littoral states.<sup>512</sup> King Hussein's two-day visit was immediately followed by the arrival of Syrian Prime Minister al-Kasm in Amman to discuss cementing bilateral relations.<sup>513</sup> In general, Damascus continued to pursue a two-pronged approach with regard to the Gulf conflict. On the one hand it stood by Iran and in fact intensified its anti-Iraqi rhetoric, at a time when many Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, escalated their propaganda war against Iran to new heights (see below). On the other hand, Syria continued to mend fences with Jordan and offered its good offices to mediate between Iran and the Gulf Arabs, in order to ease tensions and prevent expansion of the hostilities. Despite a great deal of speculation and reports to the contrary in the Arab and Western media at the time, Damascus was still intent on preserving its links with Tehran while, to the extent possible, avoiding total isolation in the Arab world.<sup>514</sup>

Besides the Jordanian initiative to wean Syria away from its non-Arab partner, the moderate Arab camp unleashed enormous invective against Iran and its remaining Arab allies, prompting some members of the former Steadfastness Front to draw closer to the Arab mainstream.<sup>515</sup> After the consultations in Tunis, Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef defended his government's decision to publicize the Mecca incident widely, calling it a "pre-mediated" Iranian plot and signalling Saudi readiness to participate in an Islamic summit solely devoted to the Iranian threat.<sup>516</sup> The harsh statements emanating from Riyadh in subsequent weeks were notable for their viciousness and racism. In order to maintain the momentum of their anti-Iranian diplomacy in the region and drive a wedge between Iran and as many Arab states as possible, the Saudi news media continued their unrelenting campaign against Tehran. Iran was rebuked for its occupation of the three disputed islands in the Gulf, also claimed by the UAE, and its illegitimate control of "Arabestan" - the southwestern part of Iran. Riyadh urged that neither of these areas belonging to the Arab homeland should be conceded to the "Persian race." It also drew parallels between

Iranian policies towards the GCC states and Sassanid Persian attempts to control the Arabian Peninsula during the pre-Islamic era.<sup>517</sup> By now, the similarities between Iraqi and Saudi propaganda were unmistakable. In essence, the Gulf War was depicted as an ethnic conflict pitting all Arabs against the Persians, and not just a struggle between two regional states.<sup>518</sup>

### **Syrian Moves to Defuse Arab-Iranian Tensions in the Gulf**

In late August, after a brief hiatus, Iraq resumed its aerial attacks against Iranian oil facilities and shipping in the Gulf region. Besides hitting more than 20 targets in the first half of September, the Iraqi air force also intensified its bombardment of Iranian urban and economic centers, carrying out almost fifty raids between August 16 and September 15.<sup>519</sup> Iran retaliated by attacking Gulf Arab shipping. In an unprecedented move, it fired a number of Chinese-made Silkworm missiles at Kuwait from the occupied Faw Peninsula in early September.<sup>520</sup> Consequently, an emergency session of GCC foreign ministers was convened on September 12 in Jeddah to discuss this new dimension to the Iranian threat. The escalation of hostilities in the Gulf and the heightening of Arab-Iranian tensions coincided with a mission undertaken by UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar to Tehran and Baghdad, to try to find some common ground between the two sides and persuade Iran to accept a ceasefire. Not surprisingly, Perez De Cuellar returned empty-handed to New York on September 16, informing the Security Council that Iran's acceptance of Resolution 598 was contingent upon the identification of the aggressor by an impartial international commission.<sup>521</sup> Due to the confluence of events, the Syrians moved to fill the void by holding consultations with the Gulf Arabs and Iranians with a view to mediating effectively and easing tensions. Damascus realized that it could not act as an intermediary between Iran and Iraq, but it could try to defuse tensions between Iran and the GCC, in an effort to enhance its own credibility as a mediator and also prevent Iran from sliding into greater isolation.

In the week prior to the second Arab foreign ministers' meeting in Tunis to consider the future of Arab-Iranian relations, Assad dispatched Vice-President Khaddam to Jeddah to hold talks with GCC foreign ministers, and Faruq al-Shara to Tehran to confer with Iranian leaders. Khaddam arrived in Jeddah on September 13, the day after the emergency session of the GCC was convened. The GCC foreign ministers issued a communiqué demanding Tehran's full acceptance of Resolution 598 and exchanged views with Khaddam on the situation.<sup>522</sup> Three days later, al-Shara visited the Iranian capital, where he submitted a message from Assad to Khamene'i and also met with his Iranian counterpart. The primary purpose of their talks was to discuss ways to contain the situation and mend Gulf Arab-Iranian ties.<sup>523</sup> Al-Shara's visit was immediately followed by the arrival of Syrian Minister of Economy and Finance al-Imadi in Tehran to explore the expansion of bilateral economic and commercial links between the two allies.<sup>524</sup> It is noteworthy that, in the run-up to the visits by the two Syrian envoys, Iran renewed its previous commitment to continue deliveries of one million tons of crude oil to Syria per annum, free of charge.<sup>525</sup> As the date for the

Tunis meeting approached, it was apparent that Syria would not depart from its previous positions, and thereby would continue to maintain its strategic partnership with Iran and oppose a rupture in Arab-Iranian relations.<sup>526</sup> Moreover, in an interview on the eve of the Arab League meeting in Tunis, Hafez Assad cautioned that "it would not be possible to reach any results through the use of power or pressures" on Iran. Instead, he stated: "it is possible to reach results with Iran through friendly dialogue."<sup>527</sup> With regard to emerging Arab attitudes towards Iran, he reiterated his opposition to banishing Iran, positing: "after Mecca, some Arabs wanted to change relations with Iran...It is against the interests of the Arabs to break relations with Iran."<sup>528</sup> The Syrian leader reaffirmed that he had no intention of withholding support for Iran and credited Syrian diplomacy for playing "a major role in preventing the expansion of the war."<sup>529</sup>

## **THE REVERSAL OF IRAN'S FORTUNES ON THE REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STAGE (SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER 1987)**

### **The Arab League Meeting in Tunis and its Consequences**

When the Arab League Council reconvened for an extraordinary session on September 20 in Tunisia, two crucial factors favored the pro-Iranian camp. Already, the UN Security Council had opted for a diplomatic solution once more, by giving Perez de Cuellar more time to bridge the gap between the two sides, before considering the imposition of sanctions on Iran. Secondly, it was obvious that a consensus could not be reached on the issue of an Arab diplomatic boycott of Iran, since the Syrian-led camp in the Arab League (composed of Libya, Algeria, South Yemen, Oman and the UAE) was vehemently opposed to such a move and instead advocated further dialogue with Tehran.

Upon arrival in Tunis, the chairman of the meeting, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, stated that the main goal would be to reach agreement on holding an Arab summit to decide the future of Arab-Iranian relations.<sup>530</sup> The pro-Iraq camp had realized from the very outset that it would not be feasible to forge a consensus at this stage on a common Arab stand towards Tehran, with at least seven Arab states, led by Syria and Algeria, advocating further negotiations with Iran.<sup>531</sup> Furthermore, the members decided to postpone any crucial decision in order not be seen as being out of step with the UN Security Council, thereby giving Iran more time to reconsider its position.<sup>532</sup> In addition, a drastic move such as the severance of ties with Iran had to be decided at the highest level, by the heads of state. Overall, the second meeting in Tunis was viewed as a stepping stone for gradually achieving a consensus and setting the stage for collective action, if and when it was eventually deemed necessary.

Once again, in his opening speech to the delegates, the Saudi foreign minister lambasted Iran for its "excessive intransigence and persistent rejection" of peace efforts, calling for collective Arab action to thwart Iran's "terrible scheme."<sup>533</sup> By the end of the meeting, the members could only agree to hold an Arab summit in seven weeks' time, on November 8, in Amman, Jordan.

Although the resolution passed at the conclusion of the emergency session indicated that the purpose of the summit would be "to examine the developments in the Iran-Iraq war from all angles," as the conflict was "now at the core of the Arab nation's concerns in view of the great dangers which its continuation and likely expansion constitute for the Arab nation," no agreement was reached on whether the Gulf War should be the only item on the agenda.<sup>534</sup>

During the proceedings, Faruq al-Shara voiced strong reservations about a gathering of Arab leaders to discuss only a single item, namely, the Gulf War, while ignoring the centrality of the Arab-Israeli conflict and other important issues, including the Palestinian question and the Lebanese crisis.<sup>535</sup> The day after the Tunis meeting, upon his return to Syria, al-Shara immediately declared that the Amman conference should be dedicated to discussing major challenges facing the Arab nation, "starting with basic and essential issues such as the Arab-Israeli conflict;" otherwise Syria would not participate in the summit.<sup>536</sup> The Syrians were adamant that the summit agenda should reflect the primary importance of the Arab-Israeli struggle rather than the hostilities in the Gulf region. Several other Arab states, including Libya and South Yemen, concurred with the Syrian position, thereby raising the prospect of a summit boycott by a number of Arab governments.<sup>537</sup> In general, Damascus' objective in expressing major reservations about giving the Iran-Iraq war priority over the Arab-Israeli issue was three-fold: to prevent its own concerns regarding unresolved issues with Israel from being ignored; to avoid, as Iran's primary Arab supporter, becoming the target of criticism for its stance in the Gulf War at the meeting; and to prop up the position of its Iranian ally by downplaying the issue of the Gulf conflict.

In an effort to dissuade Assad from boycotting the Amman summit, and fearing that several other Arab leaders might follow suit, King Hussein and Prime Minister al-Rifai arrived on September 24 in Latakia, where the Syrian leader was staying. In spite of their efforts to persuade him to attend a conference dealing solely with the Gulf War, Assad would not be swayed.<sup>538</sup> Assad demanded a formal broadening of the summit agenda. The Syrian position was reaffirmed two days later during the visit of Vice-President Khaddam to Libya, where both sides emphasized that they would not attend the conference unless "all issues of interest to the Arab nation" were discussed.<sup>539</sup> In tandem with the pronouncements of Syrian officials, the Syrian news media also toed the official line, describing the Gulf conflict as a "secondary issue." For example, an article that appeared in the daily, *Tishrin*, on October 4 criticized the Iraqi attempt to divert Arab attention from the Palestinian front in order to focus on "marginal, fabricated issues" since it only served Saddam Hussein's "personal purposes," and the "enemies of the nation."<sup>540</sup>

As conference host, to ensure maximum attendance and success, King Hussein prudently decided to remove the bone of contention - the summit agenda - by declaring that there would be no specific agenda and all issues, including the overarching Arab-Israeli problem, could be discussed.<sup>541</sup> Consequently, during a working visit to Damascus by Prime Minister al-Rifai on October 12 to promote bilateral cooperation, Assad informed the Jordanian envoy that he would

accept the invitation to attend the Amman conference.<sup>542</sup> Although Jordan had made a concession to ensure the participation of Syria and a number of other states, one cannot argue with certainty that Syria would not have altered its position at the last minute, had it not been for Amman's gesture. In view of the escalating tensions in the Gulf, putting Iran on a collision course with the Kuwaitis and Saudis (also providers of financial and material assistance to Assad), and Syria's own economic woes, Assad might have eventually decided to attend as the date for the Amman summit approached. Just as at the OIC summit in Kuwait earlier that year, the Syrian leader might have reversed his previous position. In the final analysis, Damascus could hardly afford completely to alienate its few remaining Arab aid donors and become sidelined in Arab politics. Even if Amman had not given in to Syrian demands, Assad might have eventually concluded it would be more advantageous to defend his own precarious position and that of his Iranian ally within Arab political fora, rather than avoiding them.

Through a combination of shrewd diplomacy and maintaining open channels of communication with both parties, Syria had managed to preserve its room for maneuver and won vital breathing space for Iran in the three-month period between the events in Mecca and the Amman summit. However, in the weeks that followed, Iranian actions and the efficacy of US-Iraqi responses nullified some of the Syrian gains. The exposure of Iran's mining operations in the Persian Gulf, its willingness to be drawn into a *de facto* war with the United States and its continued attacks on Kuwaiti oil installations and tankers strengthened anti-Iranian sentiment in the region and beyond, increasing the resolve of the pro-Iraq camp to punish Iranian excesses and bring Egypt back into the Arab fold in order to help neutralize the Iranian threat and tip the Arab balance of power against Tehran's Arab allies. In effect, Iran's clumsy moves to challenge the US and its Arab allies in the Gulf greatly weakened its hand and, in the process, worked to the detriment of Syrian interests.

### **The Iran *Ajr* Incident, the Beginning of US-Iranian Clashes, and Arab Reaction**

The Iranian government was pleased with the outcome of events in Tunis. Having won a brief respite on the regional level due to Syrian diplomacy, it now focused its efforts on appealing its case and winning international support at the annual session of the UN General Assembly in New York, where President Khamene'i was scheduled to address the UN body on September 22. However, on the night of September 21, less than 24 before Khamene'i's speech, US naval forces in the Gulf attacked and captured an Iranian naval vessel, the *Iran Ajr*, while it was laying mines some 50 miles northeast of Bahrain, killing six crewmen and apprehending the remaining 25 in the process. News of the *Iran Ajr* incident overshadowed Khamenei's address the following day, putting him in an extremely awkward position. He was left to fend off questions from reporters and deny the truth of reports, claiming instead that the vessel had been an unarmed supply ship.

There is little doubt that the assault on the *Iran Ajr* - the first direct military clash between



US and Iranian forces since the 1979 Revolution - had been deliberately timed by the US to discredit Khamene'i and derail the Iranian initiative at the UN.<sup>543</sup> Iran had now been caught red-handed laying mines in international waters, thereby justifying Washington's position that it had to maintain a high-level military presence in the region to protect the sea lanes and Gulf Arab shipping. Any remaining support for Iran on the international level quickly evaporated.<sup>544</sup>

Iran's image was further tarnished, especially in the Arab-Islamic world, the day after the *Iran Ajr* affair, when the PLO Central Committee publicly claimed that it was now in possession of documents proving secret Israeli-Iranian negotiations on Jewish Iranian emigration to "occupied Palestine."<sup>545</sup> In spite of the multiple blows dealt to it during September 21-22, Iran remained defiant and vowed revenge against the US. Syria also continued to stand by its ally, supporting Iranian claims that the *Iran Ajr* had been a supply vessel and condemning what it termed as "US piracy" and Washington's application of the "law of the jungle" in the Gulf.<sup>546</sup>

Amid the intensification of hostilities in Gulf waters, as Iraq continued the Tanker War, Iran remained undaunted and pursued its "blow for blow" doctrine irrespective of the prominent foreign naval presence. Consequently, a second US-Iranian clash occurred on October 8, pitting three US helicopters against a number of Iranian speedboats, resulting in the sinking of one craft and the death of eight crewmen.<sup>547</sup> In response, Tehran vowed revenge and fired a number of Silkworm missiles at Kuwaiti targets. On October 16, one missile struck the US-flagged Kuwaiti tanker, *Sea Isle City*, blinding its American captain and injuring eighteen other crewmen. Washington subsequently declared that it would retaliate for the attack on the US-flagged ship.<sup>548</sup>

In parallel with these developments in the Gulf theater, Iran decided to dispatch a high-level delegation headed by Prime Minister Musavi and Revolutionary Guards Minister Rafiqdoust to Damascus to confer with the Syrians on regional issues and seek assistance. A few days before their scheduled visit, Deputy Prime Minister for Political Affairs Ali Reza Moayyeri arrived in the Syrian capital to bring the Syrians up to speed and highlight Iranian concerns.<sup>549</sup> Moayyeri met with Prime Minister al-Kasm and Foreign Minister al-Shara to discuss the Gulf War and the fate of Western hostages in Lebanon.<sup>550</sup> On October 18, Musavi and Rafiqdoust, accompanied by Deputy Foreign Ministers Besharati and Lavasani, arrived in Damascus and went immediately into conference with al-Kasm, and with al-Shara later that day. The following day, Musavi was received by Hafez Assad, while al-Shara held talks with Besharati and Lavasani.<sup>551</sup> The consultations stretched over a three-day period, as the two allies deliberated over a number of important issues. The main item on the agenda was the Arab League summit in Amman, only three weeks away, as the Iranians were worried that the pro-Iraqi bloc, now enjoying the full support of Riyadh, would be able to muster enough support against Iran and finally succeed in outmaneuvering the Syrians. Tehran was fearful that the growing momentum of pro-Iraqi diplomatic efforts would precipitate a total Arab breach with Iran.<sup>552</sup>

During the talks in Damascus, the Iranians reportedly sought more Scud missiles from the Syrians to replenish their own dwindling inventory.<sup>553</sup> The Syrians, for their part, emphasized that Iran should adopt a less confrontational stance against the US and coordinate future moves concerning the Western hostages with them.<sup>554</sup> With regard to Syria's \$3 billion debt, Musavi reportedly agreed to defer the issue for another 18 months due to Damascus' severe economic woes.<sup>555</sup>

At this critical juncture, not only were the Syrians trying to serve as intermediaries between their Iranian ally on one side and the Arab and Western blocs on the other, but they were also attempting to iron out existing differences between Iran and the Soviet Union. It was rumored that Musavi held secret negotiations with Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Yuli Vorontsov in Damascus.<sup>556</sup> Indeed, Musavi's three-day stay (October 18-20) in Damascus conveniently overlapped with the presence of Vorontsov between October 17 and 19. Vorontsov had already met with al-Shara on his first day, and held consultations with Assad the next day on the Middle East peace process and the situation in the Gulf, including the implementation of UN Resolution 598.<sup>557</sup> Given the circumstances at this crucial stage, it would have been surprising if Vorontsov and Musavi had not met under such convenient conditions. It is believed that Vorontsov insisted Iran should avoid further provocations against US forces in the Gulf if it desired continued Soviet support in the UN Security Council and other areas.<sup>558</sup>

Concurrent to the Syrian-Iranian negotiations in Damascus, on October 19, the US retaliated for the attack on the *Sea Isle City* by sending warships to destroy the Iranian Rostam and Reshadat oil platforms, located 120 miles east of Bahrain. After the vessels fired more than a thousand rounds at the targets, US Navy SEAL teams moved in and blew up what remained of the two structures.<sup>559</sup> The move drew a rapid response from Tehran, where an emergency session of the Supreme Defense Council chaired by Khamene'i was convened. The Iranian government subsequently pledged swift retribution through "an appropriate and decisive" riposte.<sup>560</sup> It characterized the attack as "blatant aggression," accusing the US of waging a "full-fledged war with the Islamic Republic."<sup>561</sup> In Damascus, Musavi vowed that Iran would not remain silent, underscoring that the American presence in the Middle East was a foreign one and, "with the assistance of the people of Syria and Lebanon," revolutionary Iran would destroy its foothold in the region.<sup>562</sup> The Syrian media also tried to drum up support for Iran and justify Damascus' policies by arguing that the US attack exposed "its participation in the Iraqi regime's unjust war," and drew analogies between US policy in the Gulf and its earlier involvement in Lebanon. It went on to castigate Iraq for allegedly forging a covert relationship with the US subsequent to the breakdown of the 1979 Syrian-Iraqi unity talks.<sup>563</sup> At a press conference prior to his return to Tehran on October 20, Musavi stated that, during his talks with Assad and al-Kasm, the Syrian leadership had reaffirmed its commitment to stand by Iran, and that the hostilities in the Gulf would be halted once punishment had been meted out to Saddam Hussein.<sup>564</sup> He also mentioned that Washington had

passed a message through Syria, urging Iranian restraint in order to break the cycle of US-Iranian clashes in the Gulf, and considered the matter closed. Musavi posited: "we will not let any blow go unanswered...we will retaliate for this attack."<sup>565</sup> Iran once again struck back on October 22, this time by firing a Silkworm missile at Kuwait's Sea Island oil terminal, its main loading facility for supertankers. The terminal was handling one third of Kuwaiti oil exports at the time, and was put out of commission for a month.<sup>566</sup> After three tragic encounters with US forces, Iran was now careful to avoid attacks on American assets, for fear of further US retaliatory strikes. Instead, it concentrated on testing the parameters and degree of Washington's commitment by targeting its Gulf Arab allies in the weeks that followed.<sup>567</sup>

With a flurry of diplomatic activity in the latter part of October as the date for the Arab summit drew nearer, it was quite evident that the Saudi-led initiative to finally create a consensus in Arab ranks for the passage of an anti-Iranian resolution in Amman and for the readmission of Egypt into the Arab League would encounter Syrian opposition. However, it was unclear what Assad could do to stem the tide of anti-Iranianism sweeping much of the Arab world, and the growing calls for Egypt's rehabilitation. The gradual marginalization of the Syrian position, the cooling of Syrian-Soviet relations, the active US military intervention in the Persian Gulf and Iran's failure to adopt realistic goals in its struggle against Baghdad (and now Washington) all combined to put Syria in a highly disadvantageous position in defending its own interests and shielding its main regional ally from further blows.

Many observers questioned whether Assad would buckle under pressure from the majority of the members, especially if, in view of the abysmal state of the Syrian economy, his two main aid donors - Saudi Arabia and Kuwait - threatened to terminate assistance. Such speculation was fuelled by the fact that Syria's faltering economy finally prompted Assad to carry out a major shake-up of his government at the end of October. On October 28, the ministers for industry and supplies were sacked amid charges of mismanagement and corruption.<sup>568</sup> A similar fate had already befallen the ministers for agriculture and construction in previous weeks.<sup>569</sup> Two days later, on October 30, Assad instigated the resignation of Prime Minister al-Kasm (after he had served in his post for seven years) and replaced him with Mahmud al-Zubi, who had previously been president of the Syrian parliament.<sup>570</sup> In all, nineteen members of Syria's 35-member cabinet lost their positions. However, the portfolios for defense and foreign affairs were retained by Tlas and al-Shara respectively.<sup>571</sup>

Already six days before the summit, Kuwait's foreign minister indicated that his government was prepared to discontinue its \$50 million annual aid package to Syria if certain demands were not met. There were indications that Riyadh was also reconsidering its position on some \$500 million in annual grants to the Syrians, unless they modified their position on the Gulf War.<sup>572</sup> With emotions running high over controversial and potentially explosive issues that had to be addressed in Amman such as ostracizing Iran and re-embracing Egypt, King Fahd decided to

stay out of the fray and send Crown Prince Abdullah (who enjoyed good relations with both Syria and Iraq) in his stead.<sup>573</sup> The battle lines had already been drawn in the days preceding the Amman meeting. While Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Jordan were now at the forefront of efforts to banish Iran and formally reintegrate Egypt into the Arab community, Syria was spearheading the move to block a complete Arab break with Iran and prevent Egypt's readmission into the Arab League. Although in a minority, Damascus was not without support, since Algeria, Libya, Oman and the UAE favored keeping diplomatic channels with Tehran open.<sup>574</sup> Despite doubts about their ability to orchestrate an effective boycott of Iran, it was clear that the pro-Iraq camp was determined to formalize its rapidly expanding ties with Egypt in some manner.<sup>575</sup> With the expansion of the conflict, the Gulf Arabs wanted openly to seek Egyptian assistance to neutralize the threat posed by Iranian revanchism.

### **Syrian Participation in the Amman Summit and its Consequences**

From the very outset, Hafez Assad knew that he faced a tall order in Amman. Apart from being in a minority on the various issues that were to be discussed, he realized that he could only score limited gains through shrewd diplomacy, which would entail some degree of obduracy, compromise and deception. Assad was well aware that he could not prevail on all fronts, but he was determined to attain as much as he could in five areas that were of key interest to Syria. Essentially, these were to ensure: a) that the Arab world did not close the door to further diplomacy in the Gulf, thereby giving Syria greater opportunity to mediate between the Arab sheikhdoms and Iran and to use its influence in a constructive manner; b) that Syrian interests were not ignored with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict; c) that Egypt remained excluded from the Arab League; d) that Gulf Arab financial aid to Syria would be maintained; and e) that any move by the pro-Iraqi bloc to condemn or excommunicate Syria would be thwarted.<sup>576</sup>

It was clear the Syrians would have to take the lead and fight an uphill battle on several fronts. Libya's Colonel Qadhafi, who saw eye-to-eye with Assad on the continued exclusion of Egypt and further Arab-Iranian dialogue, had announced on November 2 that he would not attend the conference, calling it a US-inspired event directed against Iran.<sup>577</sup> Besides attempting to elevate the Gulf conflict to the level of an Arab-Persian war in order to drive a wedge between Iran and the Arab world, it was evident that the pro-Iraqi camp would try to censure Damascus for its support of Tehran and push it into a corner by demanding the suspension of aid to Syria. Already, many in the Arab world were calling Assad a traitor and a pseudo-Arab.<sup>578</sup> However, the Syrian leader was determined to confound his opponents and derail any initiative to excommunicate him or his political allies.

As the extraordinary summit got underway on the evening of November 8, King Hussein warned in his opening address that the Gulf War was "no longer confined to Iraq alone, but was now engulfing brotherly Kuwait and Saudi Arabia," and "threatening the security of the whole region

and world peace.<sup>579</sup> He argued that disunity and weakness in the Arab world were exacerbating conditions in the Gulf and Arab-Israeli arenas.<sup>580</sup> Drawing parallels between Iranian and Israeli behavior, he accused Tehran and Tel Aviv of coveting Arab territory and using religion for political ends.<sup>581</sup> To frustrate their ambitions and bolster Arab power, he called for the formal readmission of Egypt into the Arab League, since its prolonged absence had contributed to "weakening the underpinnings of the Arab order."<sup>582</sup>

During the proceedings the following morning, both Syria and Iraq took a hard line. In his address, Saddam Hussein depicted the "Iranian menace" as the greatest challenge that the Arab nation had faced since the creation of the Arab League, demanding specific censure of Iran and, in a thinly-veiled attack on Syria, suspension of Arab aid to its Arab supporters.<sup>583</sup> The Iraqi leader stated that Egypt should be allowed to rejoin the Arab fold due to the "changing and dynamic political situation" in the region.<sup>584</sup> For his part, Assad delivered a two-hour-long speech during the morning session, defiantly opposing Cairo's re-entry into the Arab League in uncompromising terms and advocating further dialogue with Tehran.<sup>585</sup> He raised questions about Egypt's ability to uphold the Arab League Charter and the 1950 Joint Defense Pact as a result of restrictions imposed by the Camp David Accords.<sup>586</sup> Furthermore, the Syrian President rejected Egypt's return on the basis that it would imply the League's tacit acceptance of the peace treaty with Israel.<sup>587</sup> In view of the huge gap between their positions, the Iraqi leader at one point became livid and threatened to walk out over indications that the participants might stop short of condemning his Iranian foe - "the vile foreign aggressor" - as he called it.<sup>588</sup> King Hussein subsequently interceded and directed his efforts at reconciling differences between the two Ba'thi rivals over the next two days.

That afternoon, the Jordanian monarch convinced Assad and Saddam Hussein to attend a four-hour mini-summit in his hotel suite in the presence of five other Arab leaders, Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, Algeria's President Benjedid, the Emir of Kuwait and the presidents of the UAE and North Yemen.<sup>589</sup> While the meeting seems to have gone relatively smoothly, with both Ba'this articulating their positions and showing varying degrees of flexibility, Assad underscored that he would veto Egypt's readmission.<sup>590</sup> The Jordanians tried to capitalize on the meeting by raising premature expectations of a breakthrough. Summit spokesman Akram Barakat characterized the encounter as "a promising start to a new era of brotherly relations between Syria and Iraq."<sup>591</sup>

Later that evening, both Assad and Saddam Hussein attended a dinner banquet hosted by King Hussein. Although denied by the Syrians, reports indicated that the two leaders held a bilateral meeting later that evening. The morning of the next day, November 10, Faruq al-Shara and Tareq Aziz met for several hours in the presence of Arab League Secretary-General Klibi. This was followed up by another round of negotiations between Assad and Saddam Hussein under the auspices of the Jordanian king later that evening.<sup>592</sup> Once again, the Jordanians widely publicized these negotiations and portrayed them in a very positive light. However, the Iraqis were

more circumspect in their statements, while the Syrians maintained total silence.<sup>593</sup>

By now, a picture was gradually emerging of the extent of Syria's willingness to give ground on the issue of the Gulf conflict and Egypt's status. Despite its posturing and tough stand, it became evident that Assad was going to make some concessions - a tactical retreat on both fronts - in order to achieve some important gains in the overall equation and prevent alienating the other Arab states completely. Reluctant to swim against the powerful tide of pro-Iraqi sentiment in Amman, Assad indicated that he would go along with a statement condemning Iran's continuation of the war and attacks on the Gulf Arab states. However, he was unwilling to approve the formal readmission of Cairo into the Arab fold. As a result of the Syrian-Iraqi talks, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Ramadan expressed optimism about prospects of Syrian backing for a final resolution supporting Iraq's position in the seven-year war. Ramadan described the shift in the Syrian position as "positive."<sup>594</sup> In addition, he stated that the talks between the Syrian and Iraqi leaders had been generally constructive. Short of a fissure in Arab-Iranian relations, Ramadan emphasized that the "minimum" Baghdad was willing to accept was unanimous endorsement of Iraq's stand in the conflict and unqualified support for UN Resolution 598 in the final summit resolution. He noted that the extent of any future Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation would depend on the degree of Damascus' cooperation in this regard. Moreover, Ramadan astutely observed that such a breakthrough would severely undermine Tehran's ideological stand and its "internal propaganda campaign," since the clerical regime had justified its war effort in part by the support it received from some key Arab states and its ideological appeal elsewhere in the region.<sup>595</sup>

On the same day, a special panel of Arab foreign ministers entrusted with drafting the final summit resolution began its deliberations.<sup>596</sup> Here, the Syrian strategy was two-fold: ruling out any compromise on the issue of Egyptian membership in the Arab League, and at the same time showing some flexibility on Gulf affairs. The official spokesman of the Syrian delegation, Gibran Kourieh, issued a statement reiterating Syria's opposition to Egypt's readmission and threatening to block any initiatives undertaken by the Arab League in other areas.<sup>597</sup> In other words, the price for Syrian acquiescence to the passage of an anti-Iranian resolution would be the continued suspension of Egyptian membership. Concerning the latter, Syria was not without support. To differing degrees, Libya, South Yemen, Algeria and even Tunisia questioned the hasty reinstatement of Egypt at this stage.<sup>598</sup> Even on the Gulf War, the Syrian and Iraqi delegations debated at length well into the late hours to formulate a compromise resolution.<sup>599</sup> Although the Syrians were fighting on several fronts, and in spite of Saudi and Kuwaiti statements that as of March 1988 they would no longer be technically obliged to continue with the ten-year subventions agreed at the 1978 Baghdad summit, the Syrians were still determined to extract as many concessions as possible, even on the issue of the Gulf conflagration. In attempts to score some gains on behalf of their Iranian partner and cushion the blow against Tehran, Faruq al-Shara demanded the inclusion of a statement condemning the US naval presence in the Gulf and, more

significantly, opposed an Arab endorsement of Resolution 598 in its existing form.<sup>600</sup>

In essence, the modifications that he sought concerning the chronological sequence of the UN resolution - namely, the appointment of an impartial international commission to determine the aggressor prior to (rather than after) the establishment of a formal ceasefire - mirrored Iran's position. More significantly, the Syrians tried to downplay the importance of the UN resolution by proposing that a delegation of Arab heads of state, perhaps led by Assad himself, travel to Tehran to persuade the Iranian leadership to sue for peace. However, the Iraqis turned down this proposal, insisting that Resolution 598 should be fully implemented without any modifications.<sup>601</sup>

Once the deliberations had ended, paving the way for the passage of the final resolution on November 11, it was readily apparent that the results were mixed. The Syrians had averted a rupture in Arab-Iranian relations in exchange for a strongly-worded resolution condemning Iran's conduct in the Gulf theater. Meanwhile, the Syrians had had to back down on their demands for the condemnation of the US naval presence in the area and the alteration of Resolution 598.<sup>602</sup> On the subject of Egypt's rehabilitation, again there was a certain amount of give and take, with both sides making concessions. The pro-Syrian camp prevailed in the debate about Egypt's status by thwarting its return to the Arab League. On the other hand, a major concession was granted through the adoption of a specific clause in the final resolution recognizing that the decision to resume bilateral diplomatic relations with Cairo fell within the provenance of each individual member of the Arab League. In fact, only Libya lobbied vigorously against this clause, with Syria and its other supporters expressing no reservations.<sup>603</sup>

In conclusion, the final statement and resolutions approved by the participants on the last day of the summit, November 11, condemned Iran's occupation of Iraqi territory, its continued aggression against Iraq and its refusal to accept a ceasefire.<sup>604</sup> The Arab League reaffirmed its support for Kuwait and Saudi Arabia in the wake of hostile Iranian moves against them.<sup>605</sup> Specifically, Iran's "repeated attacks" against Kuwait and the "acts of sabotage and rioting" perpetrated by Iranians in Mecca were denounced.<sup>606</sup> The members expressed solidarity with Iraq and urged Iran and the UN Security Council to fully implement Resolution 598 "in accordance with the sequence of its clauses."<sup>607</sup> Moreover, they indicated their readiness to uphold their obligations towards Iraq as stipulated in the Arab League Charter and the 1950 Joint Defense Pact. They also affirmed their willingness to fulfill similar obligations towards the GCC states in the event of further Iranian attacks against them.<sup>608</sup>

At a press conference immediately following the end of the proceedings, King Hussein proudly declared that it had been the "summit of harmony and accord."<sup>609</sup> With Syria - the "beating heart of Arabism" and Iran's most important Arab ally - having grudgingly given its consent to the final communiqué and relevant resolutions, the Jordanian host could now claim some credit for breaking the political impasse that had paralyzed the Arab League. With Assad now "falling into line", an illusion of Arab solidarity against Iran had been created, albeit temporarily. More

importantly, though, the path was now clear for the de facto reintegration of Egypt into the Arab fold after a nine-year absence. By feigning solidarity with the mainstream Arab states, Syria had on this occasion escaped accusations of impeding joint Arab action to restore some semblance of unity in Arab ranks.<sup>610</sup>

Undoubtedly, Jordanian prestige was enhanced by the relative success of the conference. On the other hand, even before leaving Amman, the Syrian delegation took steps to dispel the mirage of Syrian solidarity with the pro-Iraq camp. Assad's spokesman, Gibran Kourieh, steadfastly denied Jordanian claims that King Hussein had reconciled the Syrian and Iraqi presidents.<sup>611</sup> Indeed, at the conclusion of the summit in the Royal Cultural Center, when asked to shake hands in front of reporters, Assad and Saddam Hussein pointedly declined to do so.<sup>612</sup> One Syrian official also explained that the outcome of the Amman summit would not have a decisive impact on the Damascus-Tehran axis.<sup>613</sup>

Some press reports at the time claimed that Assad had received pledges of assistance amounting to some \$2 billion in financial aid and oil from the GCC states in exchange for his political support. However, the existing evidence shows that these claims were baseless, mere speculation.<sup>614</sup> Iraqi Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz later posited that some of the Gulf states promised to provide support to Damascus on condition that it pursued a constructive policy in the Gulf.<sup>615</sup> Syrian conduct in Amman reflected a shrewd calculation of profit and loss in order to carry out an effective damage limitation exercise and yield few substantial concessions. As in many past instances, Assad had shown himself to be a master of maneuver, escaping Arab opprobrium without terminating his alliance with Iran. Damascus remained well positioned to coax the Gulf states to provide desperately needed aid without the loss of Iranian oil shipments.<sup>616</sup>

Predictably, Iran denounced the outcome of the Amman summit, calling it "a shameful, humiliating defeat for the Arab masses."<sup>617</sup> With regard to the condemnation of Iranian conduct in the Gulf region, Tehran reiterated that "despite all the enemies' plots and propaganda," it was "determined to continue its defensive war until the aggressor Baghdad regime" had been punished and "Iran's rightful demands were met."<sup>618</sup> As far as Egypt's informal re-entry into the Arab fold was concerned, the Arab League's decision was depicted as an "implicit acceptance of the Camp David Accords - an act of treason."<sup>619</sup> The restoration of ties with Cairo was described as the legitimization of the "Zionist entity" and abandonment of the Palestinian cause.<sup>620</sup> Overall, the outcome of the summit must have come as an immense disappointment to Iran's Islamist regime. Although Tehran was very much appreciative of Syrian efforts in successfully blocking a rupture in Arab-Iranian relations, nonetheless, Iran turned out to be the biggest loser in Amman, thus highlighting the general failure of Iran's Arab policy since the 1979 Revolution.

The Amman summit was a major watershed and marked an important turning point in Syrian-Iranian fortunes in the 1980s. While the conference could be considered a tactical victory of sorts for the two states, particularly Syria, it demonstrated that Iran's mismanagement of the



general conduct of the war had rallied the majority of the Arab world against it and galvanized support for Saddam Hussein. In the broader picture, the clerical regime's ideological zeal combined with its inability to assess realistically the evolving political and strategic conditions in the Gulf and beyond had led to its gradual isolation in the Middle East, had diminished Syrian-Iranian power and prestige in the region, had marginalized Syria's position in inter-Arab politics and had increased Tehran's dependence on Syrian goodwill and cooperation. In the Gulf conflict itself, Iran's failure to harmonize its war aims and capabilities, and to integrate military and manpower requirements with available domestic resources resulted, in the squandering of valuable assets, and horrendous losses. Despite growing Arab and international support for Iraq since 1984, Iran's futile attempts to bring Iraq to its knees and to intimidate its Gulf Arab allies internationalized the conflict, thereby alienating most of the Arab-Islamic world. It provided a pretext for the Reagan administration to deploy military forces in the Persian Gulf, and to intervene as a de facto co-belligerent siding with Baghdad.

In many respects, the Amman summit sounded the death knell of revolutionary Iran's hopes and aspirations to export its Islamist ideology to other areas of the Middle East, just as the failure of Operation Karbala 5 earlier in the year finally drove home the fact to some elements within the Iranian leadership that Iraq could not be defeated on the battlefield. From the standpoint of many Arab governments, the direct challenge posed by a neighboring Islamic country to the status quo in the Arab East, both in terms of security and ideology (particularly a political ideology that had an organic familiarity, legitimacy and appeal to some of the Arab masses) impelled the anti-Iranian camp to elevate Iran to enemy number one, thereby replacing Israel as a more serious and present danger. The Amman resolution portrayed Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as "confrontation states," much to the disappointment of Syria and Lebanon.<sup>621</sup> With the Arab commitment to the Arab-Israeli struggle waning, in an unprecedented move, the Arab League had relegated the Palestinian struggle to a secondary position.<sup>622</sup>

In general, the Amman summit represented a double blow for Iran in symbolic and ideological terms. On one level, the strongly-worded resolution (approved by the overwhelming majority of the Arab League), harshly rebuking Iranian policies for the first time, conveyed the impression that the Iraqi-Iranian conflict had now been elevated to the level of a war pitting Arabs against Iranians.<sup>623</sup> Secondly, the sharp denunciation of "the bloody and criminal acts perpetrated by the Iranians" in Mecca (according to the text of the resolution) directly challenged the religious and ideological legitimacy of Khomeini's theocratic state. By putting the events in Mecca into an Islamic context, describing them in the resolution as "erroneous practices which are contrary to the teachings of the true Islamic faith," a severe blow had been dealt to Iran's Islamic credentials. The message was clear: supporters of Arab nationalism and Islam throughout the Arab-Islamic world were obliged to confront the Iranian threat.<sup>624</sup>

Although Syria had headed off an Arab-Iranian break by the Arab League, in effect

securing a tactical and symbolic victory for itself and its non-Arab partner, in reality, by the end of 1987, this was a moot point. Arab-Iranian relations had reached a nadir, with key states such as Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and several others no longer having diplomatic relations with Iran. A de facto Arab-Iranian rift had occurred, leaving the clerical regime politically isolated and ideologically discredited.

Syria's predicament was in many respects comparable with Iran's, although not as grave. Assad had succeeded in orchestrating a careful balancing act in Amman by swimming with the tide of Arab unity to condemn Iranian policies and keep open diplomatic channels with the pro-Iraqi camp, and in parallel to extract some noteworthy concessions and preserve the alliance with Iran. Damascus achieved tactical victories by prevailing on others to defer the question of Egypt's membership in the Arab League and to refrain from severing links with Iran. To a limited extent, Syria had proven its ability once more to be a spoiler and to score certain gains. In reality, though, they were only of short-term benefit, amounting to very little in substance.

With regard to Egypt's readmission into the Arab League, here again, it had been a hollow victory. In view of the clear consensus among the majority that Cairo needed to be reintegrated on some level (implicitly to diminish Syria's political clout, and explicitly to neutralize the military threat posed by Iran in the Gulf region), Assad could not go so far as to argue that other Arab governments did not have the sovereign right to re-establish bilateral relations with Egypt.<sup>625</sup> Already, on the last day of the Arab summit, Iraq and five GCC states officially declared their intention to restore diplomatic ties with Cairo after the end of the conference.<sup>626</sup> Within a matter of days after the resumption of full Iraqi-Egyptian ties, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Morocco, North Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Mauritania and Qatar (in that order) all followed Baghdad's lead and rushed to restore normal relations with Mubarak's Egypt.<sup>627</sup> In rapid succession over a two-week period, all these states re-established links with Cairo, much to the chagrin of Syria and its allies. In fact, by December 1987, only six states, Syria, Libya, Algeria, Lebanon, South Yemen and Tunisia had not followed suit with the majority of Arab League members.<sup>628</sup>

The beginning of Egypt's informal re-entry into the Arab fold was an indisputable sign that Syria's political fortunes had taken a turn for the worse, and that it was being sidelined in Arab affairs. The decision to officially draw Egypt into the Saudi-Iraqi-Jordanian orbit at a time when Syria was bogged down in Lebanon, and Iran was proving unable to affect the outcome of the war and becoming increasingly entangled with the US, meant that the pendulum had finally swung against the Syrian-Iranian axis. Events in the closing months of 1987 clearly demonstrated that the Damascus-Tehran nexus was gradually becoming overshadowed by a much more formidable alliance that had the full support of Washington.

## **Syria's Response to the Evolving Regional Situation in the Aftermath of the Arab League Summit**

Subsequent to the conclusion of the Amman conference, Damascus took decisive steps to shore up its regional position. In order to prevent the continued decline of its political influence, it adopted a two-pronged approach, by initiating a diplomatic campaign to reassure Iran of its continued commitment to the alliance, while offering its good offices to the GCC to defuse Arab-Iranian tensions in the Gulf. Syria's overall objectives in the immediate post-summit period were three-fold: to support Iran to the extent possible in the war against Iraq, to prove itself indispensable to the GCC states by serving as an effective mediator between them and Iran and to dissipate Arab-Iranian tensions in the Gulf in order to render Egyptian proposals for military and political support of the Arab sheikhdoms superfluous, thereby impeding Cairo's attempts to reintegrate itself into the Arab fold.

Immediately after the summit meeting, Syrian Foreign Minister al-Shara dampened expectations about a possible Syrian-Iranian fissure by stating that Damascus did not support the Arab League's condemnation of Iran. He castigated Secretary-General Klibi's omission of certain Syrian reservations regarding Iran while reading the final statement. He also cautioned that the significance of the talks between Assad and Saddam Hussein should not be exaggerated.<sup>629</sup> Concomitantly, the Syrian media denounced attempts by some of the other Arab states to "distort" Syria's stance towards Iran and emphasized the continued importance of Syrian-Iranian cooperation.<sup>630</sup> An editorial in *Tishrin* on November 14 criticized the Arab League's attempt to isolate Iran by misrepresenting the Gulf War as an Arab-Persian conflict. It went on to conclude: "in the final analysis, Iran is the natural ally of the Arabs in their battle against Israel and the United States."<sup>631</sup> Moreover, on the same day, al-Shara declared that "Syria remains firmly on the side of the Iranians and will never depart from its solidarity with the Islamic Republic."<sup>632</sup> Two days later, on November 16, Faruq al-Shara sent a message to Ali Akbar Velayati stressing the continued need for Syrian-Iranian solidarity and indicating his intention to visit Tehran soon in order to brief his Iranian counterpart on what had transpired in Amman.<sup>633</sup>

In tandem with sending promising signals to Iran, Syria undertook measures to diminish the GCC's perceived need for Egyptian military assistance. Such action on the part of Damascus assumed greater urgency in the light of Iran's reaction to the Arab summit. (See next section.) Already in the days following the Amman meeting, Egyptian military officials were dispatched to several Gulf states, most notably Kuwait, to examine ways to improve security. Among the issues discussed were bolstering air defense capabilities against possible Iranian aerial attacks and beefing up internal security to counter subversive activities by local pro-Iranian groups.<sup>634</sup> Consequently, on November 21, as a two-day meeting of GCC heads of state got underway in Abu Dhabi to discuss joint security and defense measures, Assad sent messages to GCC leaders assuring them that, in the event of Iranian aggression, Syrian troops would be sent to protect

them.<sup>635</sup>

The Syrian President also tried to increase his room for diplomatic maneuvering between the antagonists by sending a trade delegation to Iraq on November 21 to explore opportunities for renewed commerce between the two sides, to concur with the renewal of telephone links between them and a continued understanding to refrain from propaganda campaigns against one another. However, the talks seem to have come to naught, since Syria was still unwilling to meet even Iraq's minimum demand to move towards neutrality in the Gulf War. Impatient with the lack of progress in the Syrian-Iraqi dialogue, King Hussein shuttled between Damascus and Baghdad from November 25 to 30 in an effort to persuade the Ba'thi rivals, as a first step in the normalization process, to re-establish diplomatic relations. Again, he failed to break the deadlock.<sup>636</sup> During King Hussein's deliberations in the two capitals, on November 29, Iran's ambassador to Damascus, Mohammad Hassan Akhtari, met with Syrian Information Minister Salman, who reassured him that Syria's stance toward Iran and the Gulf War remained "unchanged."<sup>637</sup>

#### **Iran's Response to the Amman Summit, and Subsequent Diplomatic Moves in the Gulf Conflict**

From the perspective of Iran's revolutionaries, the outcome of the Amman summit was a major disappointment, representing a symbolic and psychological blow to their crusade to transcend ethnic-sectarian cleavages by uniting Persians and Arabs under the banner of revolutionary Islam.<sup>638</sup> In view of the American resolve to use force in the Persian Gulf, and continued Iraqi aerial attacks, Iran tried to muster the necessary strength to initiate new ground offensives, in order to keep Baghdad under pressure and demonstrate to the pro-Iraqi camp that the Islamic Republic remained undeterred, despite the political setback experienced in Amman. Already, Iran had begun another military mobilization, claiming success in building up some 200 battalions of volunteers (Baseej), composed of 200,000 to 500,000 men. In reality though, the clerical regime was facing severe difficulties in this endeavor, with only 60,000 to 100,000 men reporting for duty.<sup>639</sup> Two days after the conclusion of the Amman summit, on November 13, Iran's Supreme Defense Council announced a new mobilization campaign, fuelling some speculation that Tehran was planning a major winter offensive.<sup>640</sup> However, the magnitude of the brewing crisis within Iran was underlined by the fact that, on this occasion, Ayatollah Khomeini himself had to issue a religious decree calling on all able-bodied men to enlist and all other citizens to donate money to pay for the cost of one soldier each at the front.<sup>641</sup>

Meanwhile in the Gulf, the Tanker War continued unabated, with both sides escalating their attacks. As tensions rose once more, Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia followed up on King Hussein's earlier initiative to mediate between Syria and Iraq by departing for Baghdad on December 19 to hold talks with Saddam Hussein. The next day, he left for Damascus, where he was received by Hafez Assad.<sup>642</sup> Although little headway seems to have been made in healing the

Syrian-Iraqi rift, as a direct outcome of the Saudi-Syrian dialogue, Damascus subsequently stepped up its mediation efforts between Iran and the GCC states. Faruq al-Shara embarked on a new round of shuttle diplomacy between Tehran and Riyadh during the period December 22-29, with his efforts bearing some substantive results.<sup>643</sup>

Due to strong Syrian pressure, Iran halted its attacks on Gulf Arab shipping, which had peaked just before Christmas.<sup>644</sup> In between two visits to the Iranian capital, the Syrian foreign minister spent several days in Riyadh, where GCC heads of state had gathered for the GCC summit meeting.<sup>645</sup> Again, al-Shara seems to have prevailed upon them to adopt a more moderate position vis-à-vis Tehran. Indeed, the final communiqué issued at the end of the GCC conference on December 29 was noteworthy for its conciliatory tone, contrasting sharply with that of the Arab League summit in Amman. While the participants expressed regret for the "destructive" war between Iran and Iraq, and Iran's "procrastination" in accepting UN Resolution 598, they omitted any reference to the Mecca incident and refrained from directly condemning Iranian conduct in the Gulf War.<sup>646</sup> Afterwards, in a surprising move, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal asserted that the GCC's "dialogue with Iran has never ceased, it is continuing, and will continue."<sup>647</sup>

Overall, the efficacy of Syria's diplomacy, and the support that it received from states such as Oman and the UAE which favored maintaining links with Iran, prompted both sides to take a step back and decrease hostilities in the Gulf, if only temporarily.<sup>648</sup>

#### **THE GULF WAR AND SYRIAN MEDIATION EFFORTS (JANUARY - MARCH 1988)**

In the early weeks of 1988, the Syrians followed up on their earlier success in easing Arab-Iranian tensions in the Persian Gulf by intensifying their mediation efforts. With the lull in the Tanker War and the conciliatory position adopted by the GCC towards Iran at the Riyadh summit, Damascus was determined to press on to defuse the potentially explosive situation, gain precious political capital by laying the groundwork for a GCC-Iran dialogue and convince Tehran to desist from provocative acts in the Gulf. Moreover, the tour of the Gulf sheikhdoms by newly-appointed US Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci in early January, and a ground-breaking visit to the region by Hosni Mubarak scheduled for mid-January to consolidate the budding friendship between Egypt and the GCC, lent greater urgency to the Syrian initiative. Damascus was particularly concerned that Cairo would exacerbate the situation, by playing up the Iranian threat in order to strengthen its emerging military ties with the Gulf states and, in doing so, diminish the efficacy of Syrian diplomacy to bridge the gap between the two sides.

Throughout the winter of 1987-88, as Iran tried to mobilize enough men and materiel for another possible offensive in the Basra area, the Syrians, in consultation with the Gulf Arabs, anxiously tried to head off such a move, fearing that an operation similar to Karbala 5 would accelerate Egyptian moves to cement defense links with the GCC, galvanize support for Iraq and

in the process push Syria to the sidelines of Arab and regional politics.<sup>649</sup> Subsequent to al-Shara's successful shuttle diplomacy between Tehran and Riyadh in late December, Assad tried to build on the earlier gains by dispatching Vice-President Khaddam along with al-Shara to the Gulf states to offer Syria's good offices once again. The involvement of Khaddam underscored the seriousness of the Syrian effort to bring about an accommodation between Iran and the GCC. The Gulf states were also willing to give Syrian mediation a chance in view of the fact that UN efforts had proven to be ineffective.<sup>650</sup>

As Khaddam and al-Shara prepared to set off for the Gulf region, Carlucci toured the GCC states, meeting with political leaders in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman. At the same time, Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati declared that, in response to the promising signals from the GCC and Syrian entreaties, Tehran was prepared to commence a dialogue with Gulf states.<sup>651</sup> Once Khaddam and al-Shara began their consultations in the GCC states in subsequent days, it became evident that the purpose of their mission was multifold. Not only were they attempting to build diplomatic bridges across the Gulf to improve GCC-Iranian ties and contain the hostilities, but they also aimed to put forth a series of proposals in order to achieve a comprehensive peace in the region.<sup>652</sup> Damascus hoped to persuade Tehran to refrain from conducting any major offensives against Iraq, and to convince Baghdad through Gulf Arab intermediaries to continue its moratorium on attacks targeting Iranian shipping in Gulf waters. By preserving a degree of calm in the area, the Syrians intended to prod the GCC to adopt a neutral position in the war and pay Iran reparations demanded from Iraq, in exchange for an Iranian commitment to cease hostilities, and withdraw from occupied Iraqi territory.<sup>653</sup> The Syrians were genuinely worried that a full-scale offensive by Iran would provide Washington and Cairo with the perfect pretext to intervene effectively on the side of the pro-Iraqi camp, torpedo Syrian attempts to reach a diplomatic solution and facilitate the passage of a UN Security Council resolution imposing an international arms embargo on Iran.<sup>654</sup>

As Carlucci continued his talks with Gulf Arab officials, the Syrian delegation headed by Khaddam also began its tour of the GCC states, offering to arrange and even host a meeting between Iranian and GCC representatives.<sup>655</sup> During the deliberations with Gulf Arab leaders, Khaddam and al-Shara proposed that the GCC should encourage Baghdad to continue its ceasefire in the Gulf. In exchange, Syria would do its utmost to discourage any possible Iranian land offensive. Under such circumstances, the GCC and Iran could commence a dialogue under Syrian auspices to improve relations and explore possibilities to end the war.<sup>656</sup>

Unfortunately for the Syrians, their strategy suffered from three major weaknesses. Firstly, the GCC countries were divided on this issue. While Oman, Qatar and the UAE seemed amenable to Syrian mediation, and were eager to thaw relations with Iran, the other three members, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, were reluctant to support the Syrian plan wholeheartedly.<sup>657</sup> Secondly, Iraq was deeply suspicious of Damascus' motives, interpreting this initiative as part of an effort to

break the unity achieved in Arab ranks in Amman. Baghdad believed that Syria was trying to decouple the GCC and Iraq by facilitating a GCC-Iranian rapprochement, and in parallel to assist Iran by isolating Iraq. Thirdly, Iran did not see eye-to-eye with its Arab ally in terms of Syria's overall agenda. On the one hand, the clerical regime was appreciative of Syrian moves to curb attacks on Iranian shipping and ease Arab-Iranian tensions. It interpreted the Syrian effort as a means to gain some room for maneuver diplomatically, buy some time to weigh its options and reverse its slide into greater regional isolation. On the other hand, the hardliners within the Iranian government who enjoyed the stalwart support of Ayatollah Khomeini were intent on continuing the war with Iraq until the overthrow of the Iraqi Ba'th. The more pragmatic elements within the ruling elite hoped to cut Iran's losses by finding a face-saving way to extricate themselves from the conflict. In general, it is extremely difficult to assess what was happening within the black box of Iranian decision-making at the time. Although some members must have welcomed the proposals put forth by their Arab ally to end the war, it is evident that the hawks led by Ayatollah Khomeini himself were still in the dominant position, refusing to contemplate a negotiated settlement.

On January 10, the head of the UAE Foreign Ministry's GCC department, Saif Said, arrived in Tehran carrying a message for Ali Akbar Velayati. The UAE indicated that the purpose of Said's mission was to hold talks with Iranian officials aimed at "defusing tensions in the Gulf and ending the Iran-Iraq War." Subsequent to these deliberations, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholislam stated that the conflict would only be terminated when Saddam Hussein was toppled and called on the GCC to withdraw its support for Iraq.<sup>658</sup> Not surprisingly, Baghdad now seized the opportunity to end the tacit truce between the two sides brokered by Syria since late December. With Hosni Mubarak's visit to the Gulf only a few days away, Iraq launched new aerial attacks against Iranian targets, bombing the Tabriz oil refinery and hitting four tankers near Kharg Island between January 10 and 12.<sup>659</sup> In order to avoid contributing to the total collapse of the Syrian mediation effort and playing into Iraq's hands, Iran refrained from attacking Gulf Arab shipping and reiterated its willingness to pursue a political dialogue with the GCC.<sup>660</sup> On January 12, Syrian Minister of Information Salman somewhat prematurely declared: "We have succeeded in achieving an agreement by Iran and the Arab Gulf states to achieve a direct dialogue."<sup>661</sup>

As Mubarak's visit to the region got underway, Iran denounced what it depicted as Egyptian meddling in the Persian Gulf and accused Cairo of stoking the fires in the region.<sup>662</sup> The Egyptian leader toured the Gulf region in mid-January to cement ties by bolstering military and economic cooperation with the GCC. He intended to conclude a number of military cooperation agreements in exchange for greater financial aid from the Gulf sheikhdoms.<sup>663</sup> To highlight Cairo's commitment to Gulf security, during his stay in Saudi Arabia, Hosni Mubarak declared that "Egypt is an Arab country and the security of this area is part of Egyptian security."<sup>664</sup> Only a day later, in Kuwait, he also implicitly rejected the Syrian mediation effort during a press conference.<sup>665</sup>

Iran, for its part, was trying to perform a delicate balancing act. It wanted to avoid casting

a pall over the Syrian initiative to defuse GCC-Iranian tensions, and to thwart Egyptian attempts to make further inroads in the Gulf, but at the same time it felt compelled to respond to Iraqi attacks. Rafsanjani warned that Iran was poised to launch a new ground offensive and might be forced to abandon the restraint it had exercised to date out of respect for Syrian efforts. He urged the Gulf states to distance themselves from Saddam Hussein and "come to the side of justice before it is too late."<sup>666</sup> Only days later, on January 15, Iran conducted a limited operation along the northern front in Iraqi Kurdistan, codenamed Bayt al-Moqaddas 2.<sup>667</sup> In concurrence with the renewed fighting in the north, Tehran announced its intention to follow up the dialogue with the GCC and sent the Foreign Ministry's Director-General for Arab-African Affairs, Mohammad Hossein Lavasani, to Abu Dhabi to hold further talks with UAE officials.<sup>668</sup> His deliberations with the UAE foreign minister resulted in an Iranian pledge to refrain from attacking vessels flying flags of GCC states.<sup>669</sup>

By the latter part of January, several issues were becoming increasingly clear. Syrian success in facilitating a constructive dialogue between the GCC and Iran had been limited at best. The GCC was still divided on the wisdom of pursuing such an approach. Indeed, Tehran's assurance that it would desist from hitting GCC ships was only a limited concession, since the majority of the vessels destined for the Gulf states were not flying the flags of these countries. Moreover, it was evident that Iran was facing severe difficulties in mobilizing the necessary numbers to sustain a land campaign and assault Basra once again.<sup>670</sup> Speculation now emerged that a de-escalation in the land war was inevitable.<sup>671</sup> Altogether, these were unmistakable signs that the Islamic Republic was running out of options and had painted itself into a corner, in spite of Syrian attempts to heal the rift between Iran and the Gulf Arabs and devise an acceptable formula to end the war. In order to maintain pressure on Baghdad and its allies, in mid-January, Iran decided to respond in kind to Iraqi attacks in the Gulf by once again targeting third-country ships bound for Gulf Arab ports.<sup>672</sup> Overall, Iran's riposte was ineffectual since it perpetuated tensions in the Persian Gulf without yielding any substantive results in strategic terms. On land, it was now only capable of conducting offensives on a limited scale.

### **Iraq's Reaction to Syrian-Iranian Moves in the Gulf**

After a brief pause from late December until mid-January, Iraq subsequently adopted an aggressive, two-track strategy to deal decisive blows against Iran in the Gulf in order to force it to the negotiating table and discredit Syrian moves to bridge the gap between the GCC and Iran. Baghdad resumed the Tanker War and conducted deep penetration raids against Iranian targets throughout January and February, highlighted by attacks on Kharg on February 7 and the Rey oil refinery on the outskirts of Tehran on February 27.<sup>673</sup> Besides trying to bring Iran to its knees, the aerial campaign was also intended to feed into the policy of impeding Damascus' effort to stabilize the situation in the Gulf and ease GCC-Iran tensions. Baghdad hoped that an intensive assault on



Iran's strategic assets would fuel the fires and prompt Iran to threaten the Gulf Arabs in an overt manner. Such a development would derail the Syrian initiative and demonstrate the limits of Assad's influence. Concurrently, Iraq finally broke its silence and renewed its propaganda campaign against Syria for the first time since the Amman summit. The state-controlled media denounced the Syrian attempt to revive a GCC-Iran dialogue, since it violated the spirit of the Amman summit resolutions to create a united Arab front against Iran. Damascus was accused of "whitewashing Iran," and trying to isolate Iraq at the same time.<sup>674</sup> The Iraqi Ba'th unleashed an unrelenting barrage of criticism against its Syrian rival. Iraqi Minister of Information Jasim claimed that none of the Arab states trusted the Syrians since they had been "Iran's constant allies."<sup>675</sup> A few days later, on January 26, Foreign Minister Tareq Aziz dismissed Syria's intercession, reiterating that UN Security Council Resolution 598 was the only formula for ending the hostilities. In addition, he expressed pessimism about the prospects of a Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement, because of Damascus' insistence to break with the pan-Arab consensus achieved in Amman.<sup>676</sup> Saddam Hussein also publicly accused Syria of endangering Arab security by serving as Iran's strategic ally, urging it to remain neutral at the very least.<sup>677</sup> The Iraqi leader blamed Syria for the return to the "pre-summit atmosphere" by renegeing on the anti-Iranian consensus reached at the Amman conference.<sup>678</sup> The anti-Syrian polemic emanating from Baghdad increased during late January and early February. In an article published in *Al-Thawrah* on January 31, Deputy Prime Minister Ramadan called Syrian policy in the Gulf "a dirty attempt to divide brothers," warning that Arab fragmentation would only encourage Khomeini to continue the war. Furthermore, he stated that Iran's strategy was to create a new Persian empire under the guise of exporting revolutionary Islam.<sup>679</sup>

Damascus' reaction to Baghdad's war of words was relatively restrained. It is noteworthy that the Syrians tried to exploit the recent unrest in the Occupied Territories to justify their stand in the Gulf War, and deflect criticism. With the Palestinian intifada bringing a renewed focus in the region and beyond on the Arab-Israeli struggle, Syrian officials stressed that, from the very outset, they had believed Iraq's ill-conceived effort to wage war on Iran, and its attempts to depict the hostilities as an Arab-Iranian war, to be harmful to the combatants, and to have diverted Arab attention away from the centrality of the Palestinian issue.<sup>680</sup> They rejected Iraqi accusations that their mediation in the Gulf was to the detriment of pan-Arab interests, arguing that preventing an escalation of hostilities that could potentially drag the GCC states into the war, and establishing "channels for dialogue and understanding between the Gulf states and Iran," would be beneficial to the Arabs.<sup>681</sup> Interestingly enough, Damascus countered that Iraq's condemnation of its initiative in the Gulf and intentional policy of intensifying its air campaign in the waterway could only be interpreted as an attempt to destabilize the region and divert Arab and international attention away from the uprising in the Occupied Territories.<sup>682</sup>

As Iraq continued to engage in hyperbole, criticizing the Syrian-Iranian partnership, any

lingering impression of Arab unity that had persisted since Amman quickly dissipated. The marked deterioration in Syrian-Iraqi relations and the deadlock in the Gulf led to a flurry of diplomatic activity, with the various parties exercising damage control and jockeying for support to further their interests. King Hussein tried to cool Syrian-Iraqi tensions in late January by going to Baghdad and sending Prime Minister al-Rifai to Damascus. Following talks with Saddam Hussein, he then proceeded to Damascus to meet with Hafez Assad. Despite his efforts to contain the situation, neither Baghdad nor Damascus seemed willing to reconsider its policies.<sup>683</sup> Concurrent with the Jordanian initiative, Faruq al-Shara arrived in Tehran on January 30 for consultations with Iranian officials.<sup>684</sup> Al-Shara conveyed a message from Hafez Assad to Ali Khamene'i and also met with his Iranian counterpart. The deliberations dealt with ways to contain the volatile situation in the Persian Gulf and strengthen GCC-Iranian ties.<sup>685</sup>

In the aftermath of al-Shara's visit, throughout much of February, Syria continued to encourage the GCC-Iranian dialogue, while Iran refrained from attacks on vessels flying GCC flags. In fact, a period of relative calm prevailed in the Gulf between February 12 and March 6, as Iraq discontinued the Tanker War and Iran was not compelled to retaliate. This lull could be partially attributed to an incident on February 12, reminiscent of the *USS Stark* attack, when an Iraqi TU-16 bomber hunting for targets in the Gulf mistakenly fired missiles at an American destroyer, *USS Chandler*, barely missing the warship, and later mistakenly attacked a Danish tanker carrying Saudi crude, damaging it.<sup>686</sup> One can only speculate that, as a consequence, Washington and Riyadh brought pressure to bear on Baghdad to suspend its raids, particularly in view of the absence of any Iranian offensive in the Basra region and the relative restraint shown by Tehran in the Gulf. (Indeed, the fighting was confined to the north in Kurdistan and was limited in scale.) More importantly in the broader picture, Iraq seems to have acquiesced in order to give diplomacy a chance, hoping that a new American initiative in the UN Security Council would finally prod Iran to the negotiating table. As president of the Security Council, and with its term due to end on February 29, the United States announced its intention that same month to push through a resolution on the Gulf War threatening the imposition of sanctions on Iran after a 30-day period, if the UN Secretary-General failed to persuade Tehran to accept a negotiated settlement.<sup>687</sup>

While opting to give diplomacy a chance, Iraq also took advantage of the lull in the Tanker War and the absence of a major Iranian land operation to finalize preparations for its own campaign to turn the tables on Iran and bring the conflict to a favorable conclusion (in the event US moves in the Security Council failed). Baghdad gradually felt confident that it could seize the initiative on the military front and turn the tide of the war. As the US relinquished the presidency of the UN Security Council on February 29, Iranian President Khamene'i reiterated that acceptance of Resolution 598 would be contingent on prior identification of Iraq as the aggressor by the UN body. That evening, Iraq fired eleven modified Scud-B missiles (named Al-Hussein) at Tehran. It was the most intensive missile attack ever against the Iranian capital.<sup>688</sup> For the next 52 days, almost

190 missiles were fired at Tehran and other major Iranian cities in a bid to force the clerical regime to the negotiating table. These were supplemented by hundreds of sorties carried out by the Iraqi air force, bombing civilian and economic targets in and around thirty-seven Iranian cities and towns.<sup>689</sup>

Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati appealed in vain to the UN Secretary-General to intervene to stop the Iraqi attacks.<sup>690</sup> Tehran also failed to achieve a "balance of terror" with Baghdad during March and April. With only a limited number of Scud missiles in its inventory (supplied by Libya, Syria and North Korea), and less than 50 of its US-made warplanes remaining operational, it responded by firing just over 70 missiles at Baghdad and other Iraqi urban centers, while only a handful of aerial assaults were conducted by the Iranian air force.<sup>691</sup> Throughout March and April, it is estimated that 2,000 Iranians were killed by the Iraqi bombardment, and 8,000 were wounded. The attacks had a devastating psychological impact on the clerical regime and the people, as the leadership bickered and hundreds of thousands of civilians fled into the countryside and the east, amid rumors that Iraq would launch missiles armed with chemical weapons against the cities.<sup>692</sup>

As the war of the cities escalated in early March, both Iraq and Iran raised the stakes by adopting their previous strategies to exert pressure on each other. On March 8, Iraq ended its moratorium in the Tanker War and recommenced attacks on Gulf shipping.<sup>693</sup> In Damascus, the Syrian government criticized Iraqi actions and the renewed escalation of hostilities in the Gulf. Information Minister Mohammed Salman reasserted that Syria had previously won assurances from Iran that it would not attack Gulf Arab ships, putting the blame for the unstable situation squarely on Iraq's shoulders. He also brushed off Iraqi criticism of Syrian diplomacy aimed at reducing tensions in the region. Concurrently, his Iraqi counterpart, Latif Nassif Jasim, once again dismissed the prospect of reconciliation with Syria, accusing it of "stabbing Iraq in the back with its deception and lying."<sup>694</sup> As on many occasions in the past, with the sudden escalation of the hostilities in the Gulf area, and the intensification of the war of words between the Iraqi and Syrian Ba'th regimes, King Hussein tried to mediate between the two Arab rivals by visiting Baghdad and Damascus in subsequent days to hold talks with Saddam Hussein and Hafez Assad.<sup>695</sup> However, his intercession did not produce any concrete results.

Iran, for its part, decided to retaliate against Iraqi attacks on its urban centers and shipping in the Persian Gulf by launching an offensive, codenamed Wal-Fajr 10, into Suleimaniyah province (150 miles northeast of Baghdad) on March 13. The Iranian forces, with the help of Iraqi exiles and local Kurds, scored some significant gains by overrunning several border towns - including Halabjah - and subsequently pushed towards the Darbandikhan Reservoir and Dam, one of the largest in the country, that provided hydroelectric power to much of northeast Iraq and Baghdad.<sup>696</sup> In order to terrorize and punish the local Kurdish population for siding with Iran, on the night of March 16, Iraqi warplanes dropped bombs containing poison gas on the town of Halabjah,

resulting in the deaths of 2-4,000 Kurdish civilians.<sup>697</sup> The events in Halabjah reinforced Iranian claims that Iraq had been using chemical weapons extensively in the war since 1984. However, on this occasion non-combatants had intentionally been targeted for the first time. The incident provided undeniable proof of Iraqi chemical warfare. It received extensive media coverage throughout the world and focused international attention on the issue more than ever before.<sup>698</sup> Besides attempting to win sympathy for its position, Tehran tried to use the tragedy to stir up passions at home and drum up support for the war effort. However, with the Iraqi missile campaign still in full swing, the state-controlled media's focus on Halabjah may have actually backfired and unnerved the Iranian public, heightening concerns that Iraq might also fire missiles armed with chemical warheads at Iranian cities.<sup>699</sup>

In spite of the Halabjah massacre, heavy fighting raged on throughout late March and early April, with the Iraqis eventually recovering some lost ground and the Iranians once again failing to achieve a major breakthrough.<sup>700</sup> The Iranian war machine was undeniably running out of steam and popular support for the war effort waning. It was now only a question of time before Iraq would try to take advantage of the propitious circumstances and take the offensive. Indeed, the period from April to July 1988 would be fateful, with Iran suddenly suffering major reverses and Syria, being a mere spectator, unable to affect the outcome of events in favor of its ally.

#### **THE AMAL-HEZBOLLAH RIVALRY AS A FACTOR IN SYRIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS**

From early 1987 onwards, following Iran's failure to seize Basra, Lebanon gained greater significance in ideological, symbolic and practical terms for Iran's revolutionary regime. As hopes for toppling the Iraqi Ba'th and exporting the revolution to their closest Arab neighbor began to recede in the aftermath of Operation Karbala 5, the determination of Iran's clerical leaders to maintain and expand their foothold in Lebanon grew stronger. The carnage and misery produced by the ongoing civil war and the Israeli occupation continued to make Lebanon fertile ground for Iran's ideologues to proselytize and win over more adherents for their religious and political cause among the Lebanese Shi'ites. Consequently, Tehran paid greater attention to the Lebanese arena during 1987-88, channeling more resources there and showing sensitivity to attempts by other actors to undermine its influence. Although the Iranians were more resolute in their determination to expand their constituency in Lebanon, this was not supposed to be at the expense of their strategic partnership with the Syrians.

For Syria, the imperative to restore order in Lebanon assumed greater importance by 1988, due to the impending expiry of Amin Gemayel's term in office and the expected election of a new Lebanese president in September of that year. Damascus hoped to strengthen its grip in the fractious land in order to ensure a smooth transition process and the selection of a president to its own liking by the Lebanese parliament. As in the past, Syria continued to view Iranian policy in its backyard, especially the activities of Hezbollah, with ambivalence. On the one hand, the guerrilla

war waged against the Israelis and the SLA in the south received Damascus' blessing, seen as a means to bleed the Israelis and enhance Syria's confrontationalist credentials.<sup>701</sup> Moreover, support for the resistance in southern Lebanon became more important with the unexpected outbreak of the Palestinian intifada, which focused both Arab and international attention once again on the need to find a just and durable Arab-Israeli peace. The uprising in the Occupied Territories and Syrian-backed Hezbollah operations in southern Lebanon to some extent facilitated Assad's bid to garner Arab support and tip the balance of power against the Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi axis. Syria could emphasize once more that it was the only true confrontation state, and providing it with support was a pan-Arab duty.<sup>702</sup>

On the other hand, Hezbollah's stated long-term objective of establishing a religious order in Lebanon, and waging an incessant struggle against Israel and its backers, did not fit into Assad's plan to re-establish a secular, multisectarian order in the country. By the early months of 1988, as Iran continued to make inroads into the Shi'ite community at the expense of Amal and orchestrated a series of kidnappings (much to the embarrassment of Nabih Berri and Hafez Assad), both Amal and Syria became determined to take firm action to rein in Hezbollah. However, what could not be foreseen was that Iran and its Lebanese cohorts would respond in a forceful manner. While Tehran's ideologues believed that they could ill afford to give up their only bridgehead in the Arab-Islamic world, Hezbollah, with much justification, interpreted events as a fight for survival. As a result, the contradictions in Syria's Lebanon policy came to the fore by the spring of 1988 and sparked the worst confrontation ever between Amal and Hezbollah, putting the Syrian-Iranian alliance to the ultimate test.

With Iranian guidance and support, Hezbollah was by now turning into a veritable fighting force, capable of combining guerrilla tactics with conventional warfare to strike effectively at the IDF and SLA in the self-declared security zone. Damascus endorsed Hezbollah's military strategy in the south as long as the pro-Iranian movement did not go too far, since it feared that a major escalation could unwittingly drag Syria into a serious confrontation and perhaps even full-scale war with Israel. Besides direct contacts and their channels through the Iranians to ensure that Hezbollah did not go beyond certain bounds, the Syrians also expected Amal to keep the Shi'ite fundamentalists in check.<sup>703</sup> However, there was growing unease within the Amal leadership that Hezbollah was becoming too powerful and a major force to be reckoned with in Lebanon. Indeed, Amal was resentful of Hezbollah's ability to win over the hearts and minds of many Shi'ites through a combination of ideological indoctrination, financial inducements and social benefits.<sup>704</sup> The ability of the pro-Iranians to expand their base in the Shi'ite community at the expense of Amal, and to outspend their secular rival, prompted Amal officials to accuse Hezbollah of being no more than Iranian "robots," lacking genuine grassroots support.<sup>705</sup> Hezbollah inroads in Amal's traditional geographical base of southern Lebanon led to armed clashes between the two militias in September 1987, and vocal criticism of Ayatollah Khomeini and Tehran's policies in Lebanon by

Nabih Berri.<sup>706</sup>

As Hezbollah grew more confident and assertive, it showed no hesitation to criticize certain aspects of Syrian policy. Its daily newspaper, *Al-Sabi*, and the weekly, *Al-Ahd*, occasionally took an anti-Syrian stance on, for example, the prospect of a thaw in US-Syrian relations when US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy visited Damascus in October 1987.<sup>707</sup> Another sign of mounting friction between Syria and the pro-Iranian movement was the temporary detention of 120 Hezbollah members by Syrian forces in northern Lebanon during November 1987.<sup>708</sup>

During the winter of 1987-88, the Reagan administration became increasingly concerned about instability in the Middle East. Besides the ongoing hostilities in the Persian Gulf region, the sudden eruption of the Palestinian uprising, the escalation of Hezbollah operations in southern Lebanon with the blessing of Syrian military intelligence and prospects of an added political crisis in Lebanon when Amin Gemayel's presidency ended later in the year convinced Washington that concrete steps were required to mend US-Syrian relations and reach some sort of *modus vivendi*.<sup>709</sup> From the American perspective, Syria's cooperation was vital, since it was the only major ally of Iran and was the most influential player in Lebanon. Damascus' participation was essential to restore peace in the Levant and the Gulf and secure the release of US hostages. Consequently, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy travelled to Syria once more in early February to meet with Hafez Assad and find some common ground on these issues. Although all the details about their deliberations were not divulged, it is clear that Assad asked Murphy to intercede in order to bridge the gap between Syrian and Maronite positions on political reform in Lebanon and Gemayel's succession.<sup>710</sup>

Subsequent to Murphy's visit, on February 17, Hezbollah abducted Lieutenant-Colonel William Higgins, an American who was serving as head of the UN Truce and Supervision Organization's observer group (affiliated with UNIFIL) near Tyre in southern Lebanon.<sup>711</sup> Hezbollah demanded the release of Lebanese and Palestinian captives held by Israel in exchange for Higgins' freedom.<sup>712</sup> The abduction of Higgins was undoubtedly a major source of embarrassment to Amal and the Syrians since he had been kidnapped in an area nominally under the control of Amal, and his captors also intended to signal their displeasure with a possible US-Syrian rapprochement.<sup>713</sup> With the collaboration of UNIFIL, Amal cordoned off the area around Tyre and mounted an extensive search. Dozens of Hezbollah activists were detained for questioning by Amal, but to no avail.<sup>714</sup> Amal's clamp-down also sparked minor skirmishes with Hezbollah fighters in the Bekaa and the south.<sup>715</sup>

As far as any possible Iranian involvement is concerned, it was suspected that certain political figures were aware of, or indirectly involved in, Higgins' abduction. The Iranian media accused Higgins of being a CIA operative. Following the incident, Ayatollah Montazeri received Sheikhs Fadlallah and al-Tufayli in Qom to review the situation and later summoned Iran's ambassadors to Syria and Lebanon and other Hezbollah officials to discuss Syrian demands for

Higgins' immediate release.<sup>716</sup> The kidnapping served both Hezbollah and Iranian interests in so far as it dealt a blow to both Amal and UNIFIL and provided some leverage in affecting the outcome of the US-Syrian rapprochement. Both were keen to carry on the struggle in southern Lebanon and prevent being sacrificed as part of a deal between Damascus and Washington. Indeed, by mid-March, as Amal's frustration with its inability to locate Higgins grew, Nabih Berri condemned Iranian "interference" in Lebanese affairs, emphasizing his concern about the security situation in the south. In addition, he tried to play the secular, Arab nationalist card by underlining that, while Amal sought "privileged and strategic ties with Iran," relations with Syria took precedence since it was "an Arab country like Lebanon."<sup>717</sup>

As Amal-Hezbollah relations approached breaking point, Assad continued his dialogue with the US and resolved to take decisive action. Hezbollah's growing power and boldness and the need to restore Syrian credibility in the eyes of Washington prompted Damascus to mobilize Amal to crack down and curb Islamic extremism in Lebanon. Ironically, Iran's earlier mediation in the winter between the Palestinians and Amal and the consequent cessation of hostilities around the refugee camps in Beirut and the south had freed up large numbers of Amal militiamen to take part in the impending showdown with Iran's clients.<sup>718</sup> Eventually, on April 4, Amal forces attacked Hezbollah strongholds in and around Nabatiyah and Jezzine, near the Israeli-held security zone.<sup>719</sup> Following three days of heavy fighting that left more than 50 people dead and 130 injured, Hezbollah's last bastion in the south, the village of Siddiqin, was captured by Amal forces.<sup>720</sup> Hezbollah clerics and activists in the area were rounded up and expelled, and detachments of Iranian Revolutionary Guards stationed in the villages of Sharqiyah and Jibshit were forced to leave the south.<sup>721</sup> By April 9, Amal boasted that its rival was "finished militarily" in the south and subsequently released a statement denouncing Hezbollah for carrying out "evil deeds," including terrorism, kidnapping and hijacking. Hezbollah's Sheikh al-Tufayli countered these charges by accusing Amal of being "an ally of Israel" and helping America implement its designs in the region.<sup>722</sup>

It is noteworthy that Assad and Berri miscalculated and underestimated both Hezbollah and Iranian resolve to perpetuate their presence in Lebanon. The scenario that they had envisaged would not materialize. By the spring of 1988, a number of factors had contributed to the complexity of the political equation involving Syria, Iran, Amal and Hezbollah. The gradual institutionalization of Hezbollah as a political actor in Lebanon meant that it was no longer simply an Iranian proxy and was beginning to assert its independence by formulating and pursuing its own agenda. Secondly, the growing cleavages among the Iranian leadership confused the situation even further. While the pragmatists within the Tehran regime desired stable, strategic ties with Damascus, and aimed to cooperate with Syria to ease tensions and gain the release of Western hostages as long as some Iranian influence was tolerated in Lebanon, the more radical elements distrusted Syria and Amal, suspecting that Iranian and Hezbollah interests in Lebanon would

eventually be compromised as part of an overall agreement between Syria and the US on Lebanon's political future.<sup>723</sup> Thirdly, Tehran's determination to reverse the situation in Lebanon was reinforced by major setbacks in the Gulf War in mid-April, as US and Iraqi forces dealt decisive blows on land and sea. Major gains by the anti-Iranian coalition in the Persian Gulf dimmed Iranian hopes for any success and an honorable peace, thereby strengthening Tehran's drive to maintain its precarious foothold in Lebanon.

#### **THE BEGINNING OF THE END FOR IRAN: THE PRO-IRAQ CAMP SEIZES THE INITIATIVE**

As the war of the cities raged on throughout March and early April, Iran began to suffer a series of devastating and consecutive blows dealt by the pro-Iraqi camp and the United States aimed at cowing it into submission. The period between April and June marked the turning of the tide in the Gulf conflict, as Iraq seized the initiative in the ground war by launching a series of offensives that dislodged Iranian forces from prized possessions, including the Faw Peninsula, the Shalamcheh region east of Basra and the oil-rich Majnoon islands. In parallel, the United States took steps to neutralize the threat posed by Iran's naval forces in the Persian Gulf. By the end of the spring of 1988, the Islamic Republic found itself more vulnerable and isolated, both on the regional and international level, than ever before. Indeed, Iran's military reverses on land and sea, coupled with the tragic shooting down of an Iranian passenger plane by the US Navy in early July (also highlighting the lack of sympathy and support from the international community), left it with no recourse and finally led to Tehran's unconditional acceptance of UN Resolution 598 in mid-July, thus ending the longest and bloodiest war in modern Middle East history.

On April 18, Iraq commenced its first major offensive operation in seven years in the marshes south of Basra, aimed at recapturing the Faw Peninsula. Elements of the 7th Army Corps supported by Republican Guard units stormed the Iranian defensive lines. Enjoying the element of tactical surprise and outnumbering the defenders 6 to 1, the Iraqis overran the Peninsula within a 35-hour period, inflicting heavy losses on the Iranians.<sup>724</sup> Only four hours after the Iraqi offensive in Faw got underway, the US Navy attacked two offshore platforms used by IRGC naval units in the southern Gulf, in retaliation for the damage done to a US naval vessel four days earlier by a mine suspected to have been planted by Iran. The hostilities rapidly escalated, involving substantial forces from both sides. By the end of the day when the fighting finally receded, the US had inflicted enormous losses on the Iranians. In addition to destroying two platforms, its forces sank an Iranian navy frigate, a gunboat and a number of speedboats, and damaged a second frigate. On the American side, only a Marine helicopter was lost.<sup>725</sup> The Iraqi victory in Faw, the first major triumph in the land war since 1981, and the impressive success scored by the US Navy in the Gulf marked a major milestone in the evolution of the Gulf War and huge setbacks for the Iranian war effort. Iraq had clearly demonstrated that it could take the initiative in the ground war once again, while the US had shown that it would not allow Iran to gain the upper hand in the Gulf



theater, putting two of Iran's four major surface vessels out of action in the process.<sup>726</sup>

Although Washington and Baghdad never admitted any collusion in the operations against Iranian land and naval forces and denied any links between the two events, Iran was convinced that the two had coordinated their moves to maximize the prospects of success.<sup>727</sup> It seems highly improbable that the timing of the first major Iraqi land offensive in over seven years and the largest US-Iranian military clash since the 1979 Revolution, occurring only hours apart on the same day, could have been a mere coincidence. In view of the extent of US-Iraqi cooperation throughout 1987-88, the two sides must, at the very least, have informed one another of their impending actions.

Predictably, international reaction to the events of April 18 was for the most part favorable towards the United States. Syria was the only country in the Arab East to criticize US actions.<sup>728</sup> Just a few days after the victory at Faw, on April 21, Baghdad declared a unilateral moratorium in the war of the cities, while Washington announced that its forces in the Gulf would now come to the rescue of any ship being attacked by Iran, not just Kuwaiti tankers being escorted by the US Navy. With Iran still reeling from the double blows inflicted on land and sea, the US now expanded its protective umbrella in the Persian Gulf, while Iraq continued aerial raids against Iranian assets in the waterway.

In the light of the major military reverses it had suffered and its growing political isolation, Tehran dispatched Velayati to Damascus on April 23 to brief the Syrian leadership on developments in the Gulf and perhaps request further Syrian mediation to ease tensions between Iran and the Gulf states.<sup>729</sup> Upon arrival, Velayati held talks with Faruq al-Shara and was received the next day by Hafez Assad.<sup>730</sup> Besides conveying a message from Khamene'i to Assad, the primary focus of the two-hour meeting between Velayati and Assad was the situation in the Gulf, and regional and international mediation efforts.<sup>731</sup>

Even if Syrian intercession to contain the damage to Arab-Iranian relations in the Gulf was being seriously considered, in all probability, by this stage it would have been ineffective. Baghdad continued its air campaign in the Gulf (with US and Saudi assistance) and finalized preparations for its second major offensive, scheduled for late May, and aimed at driving Iranian forces east of Basra back across the international border. Throughout this period, there was very little Syria could do to aid its Iranian ally as events in the Gulf continued to unfold rapidly. As Iran received a drubbing in the Gulf at the hands of the pro-Iraqi coalition, and Syria's patience with Hezbollah was stretched to the limit in mid-May (see next section), sensing that a propitious moment had arrived, Washington dispatched its UN ambassador, Vernon Walters, to Damascus and Baghdad to forge a consensus on important regional issues and explore avenues of cooperation in the Arab-Israeli and Gulf arenas.<sup>732</sup> In view of Iranian reverses in the Gulf and Syrian-Iranian tensions in Lebanon at this critical juncture, one of Walters' goals may have been to exploit the opportunity to decouple Syria and Iran and pave the way for a Syrian-Iraqi understanding of some form. In any event, no

radical shift occurred in Damascus' partnership with Tehran.

In parallel, on May 25, Iraq launched a major offensive to dislodge the Iranians from positions east of Basra (near the border town of Shalamcheh). After ten hours of intense fighting, the Third Army Corps with the support of Republican Guard units had completely routed the Iranian forces and pushed them back across the border.<sup>733</sup> In spite of these defeats, Ayatollah Khomeini remained defiant and maintained his unwavering conviction that a military solution would still have to be pursued against the Iraqi Ba'thi regime. In a message delivered on May 28 to the opening session of the third Majles (which had been elected the previous month), he urged the people to continue to support the war effort, reaffirming that "the destiny of the war is written at the fronts, not at the negotiating table."<sup>734</sup>

In mid-June, the Iraqi army retook key positions east of Suleimaniyah in the north and, further south, overran the strategically-situated Iranian border town of Mehran on June 18. In parallel, the Iraqi air force intensified its bombing of targets throughout Iran: this peaked on June 23, when ten oil installations were attacked in the southwest. These were the heaviest raids since the end of the war of the cities in April.<sup>735</sup> Finally, on June 25, Iraq initiated a full-scale offensive in the Hawizeh marshes aimed at retaking the oil-rich Majnoon islands. Specially trained Republican Guard and amphibious units took part in this eight-hour operation. As in the previous offensives, the Iraqis enjoyed overwhelming numerical superiority and were extremely well-equipped, outnumbering their foe 20:1 in terms of tanks and artillery. They enveloped the Iranian positions in the marshes and pushed into Iran itself after annihilating enemy units.<sup>736</sup> Once again, the victory was total. The Iraqis had attained their objective at minimal cost, while thousands of Iranian soldiers were either killed or captured during the fighting. Iran conceded more ground in Iraqi Kurdistan in late June and lost some warplanes in a desperate bid to expel Iraqi forces from Iranian territory east of the Majnoon Islands.<sup>737</sup>

By now, the Iraqi steamroller seemed to be unstoppable. Indeed, many regional observers, including the Iraqis themselves, were surprised by the relative ease (when compared to earlier campaigns) in defeating the Iranians. The impressive string of Iraqi victories between April and June can be attributed to several important factors. Overall, proper and meticulous planning on the part of the Iraqis, low Iranian morale in the last phase of the war (once the initiative had been lost after Operation Karbala 5), numerical superiority of the Iraqi army in terms of men and materiel, the extensive utilization of chemical weapons and adequate intelligence on Iranian troop dispositions provided to Iraq by US satellite intelligence, all combined, had a decisive role in turning the tables on revolutionary Iran in such a dramatic manner. By the end of June, it was quite apparent that victory was beyond Iran's grasp, while Iraq had weathered the worst part of the conflict and was now indisputably on the ascendant.

Iran was now clearly on the defensive and could do very little to determine the course of events on the warfront. Momentous events in subsequent days strengthened the hand of those

factions that advocated a negotiated settlement and persuaded the hardliners, including Ayatollah Khomeini, to sue for peace. Both Iran and Syria played a largely passive role in the Gulf theater between April and July 1988. On the other hand, during the same period, they demonstrated their ability to serve as key actors in Lebanon and, in May, survived one of the most crucial tests the Syrian-Iranian alliance had ever faced.

#### **THE AMAL-HEZBOLLAH CONFRONTATION AND ITS IMPACT ON SYRIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS**

Subsequent to the rout of Hezbollah forces in southern Lebanon at the hands of Amal between April 4 and 7, Iran sent a high-level delegation headed by Ayatollah Jannati to mediate between the two Shi'ite organizations and resolve their outstanding differences. While Tehran sought to find some common ground between the two rivals, it was also keen to restore Hezbollah's military presence in the south. At a press conference at the Iranian embassy in Beirut on April 22, Jannati announced that his consultations with the various parties had led to a joint decision to form a five-member commission composed of Fadlallah, Shamseddin, two representatives from Amal and Hezbollah and himself to review the situation and seek a solution.<sup>738</sup> As the deliberations proceeded, it became evident that Berri was adamant in his refusal to allow a Hezbollah presence in the south.<sup>739</sup> Jannati was unable to bridge the gap in their positions on issues such as the UN presence in the south and confrontation with Israel and its proxies in the area. The lingering tensions and frustration over the impasse once again resulted in a flare-up, as Amal and Hezbollah forces clashed in the Bekaa Valley on April 26-27. To make matters worse, Berri accused Iran's ambassador to Lebanon, Ahmad Dastmalchian, of provoking these incidents.<sup>740</sup> Nonetheless, the commission continued its efforts throughout late April and early May. However, Hezbollah's sense of siege and perception that its enemies in Lebanon and beyond wanted to eradicate it were reinforced by a daring Israeli ground attack ordered by Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin against a Hezbollah-held citadel in the village of Maydoun (well beyond the self-declared security zone in the southwestern part of the Bekaa) on May 2. During the two days of fighting, the Hezbollah stronghold was completely destroyed, and forty of its guerrillas were slain.<sup>741</sup>

In parallel to Iran's intercession, one that was not yielding favorable results, Hezbollah augmented its cooperation with local Iranian Revolutionary Guards in order to regroup, and to strike effectively at its Shi'ite rival.<sup>742</sup> Undoubtedly, Amal and Israeli operations targeting Hezbollah bases within a short time frame contributed to the pro-Iranian militia's paranoia and underlined the belief that the movement could be on the verge of extinction. For mainstream elements within the Iranian regime, their displeasure with certain aspects of Syria's Lebanon policy compelled them (along with the more radical elements) to take decisive measures to prop up Hezbollah. At this juncture, Tehran was beginning to walk a fine line. Although it could not tolerate the elimination of Hezbollah, it was loath to jeopardize the partnership with Damascus.

During the first week in May, the Iranian team led by Jannati spent six days in Beirut trying to hammer out some form of compromise agreement. Amal continued to turn down requests for a renewed Hezbollah presence in the south to conduct operations against the occupation.<sup>743</sup> The political deadlock perpetuated the charged atmosphere and led to renewed clashes. On the morning of May 6, after an incident in which three Amal members were killed by Hezbollah in the southern suburbs, Berri immediately resolved to deal a decisive blow by unleashing an assault against Hezbollah positions in Dahiya - Beirut's predominantly Shi'ite southern suburbs and slums.<sup>744</sup> Amal fighters (with Syrian logistical support) launched a ferocious attack, overrunning Hezbollah positions in the southern suburbs and outlying areas during the initial 36 hours of fighting.<sup>745</sup> The intensity of the Amal onslaught must have come as a surprise to Hezbollah and Iran. Both Amal and Syria seemed to have mistakenly concluded that the Hezbollah defeats in the south and Maydoun had weakened and demoralized the pro-Iranian movement, and that the opportune moment had also arrived to remove its presence from the Lebanese capital.<sup>746</sup> Moreover, they underestimated Iran's determination to hold on to its assets in Lebanon in the light of the diplomatic and military setbacks it was experiencing in the Gulf. Damascus calculated that Iran would resign itself to conceding certain privileges it had enjoyed in the Levant in exchange for continued Syrian cooperation vis-à-vis a resurgent Iraq. In view of Tehran's weakness and growing isolation, the last thing Assad expected was stiff resistance to his objectives from Tehran and its proxies.<sup>747</sup>

Besides failing to predict Iran's reaction, Syria and Amal failed to grasp the growing complexity and gravity of the situation, particularly from Hezbollah's vantage point. Hezbollah by mid-1988 was no longer simply an Iranian puppet, but a semi-autonomous organization that had its own agenda and aspired to becoming a predominant force in Lebanese politics. Aside from Iran's concerns in Lebanon, Hezbollah interpreted events in April and May as a systematic and concerted effort to deny it a following among the Lebanese Shi'ites.<sup>748</sup> It is noteworthy that the southern suburbs of Beirut were now the only area of the country where Hezbollah could operate with relative freedom, since its activities in the Syrian-occupied Bekaa were closely monitored, and controlled intermittently. Consequently, resistance to the Amal incursion in southern Beirut was now considered imperative to avoid extirpation.<sup>749</sup>

As Amal wrested control of large areas of the suburbs from Hezbollah, on May 7, a large contingent of Hezbollah fighters backed by several hundred Iranian Revolutionary Guards from Ba'albek managed, undetected by the Syrians and Amal, to slip into the Lebanese capital to bolster Hezbollah's strength. The reinforced Hezbollah units immediately went on the offensive, launching a well-planned and highly-disciplined attack on Amal positions, rapidly forcing their foe to fall back and advancing in a methodical manner, capturing key areas of the southern suburbs.<sup>750</sup> As the clashes continued, calls for peace by the joint commission were ignored. On the night of May 7, a brief ceasefire was imposed after a meeting between Iranian Ambassador Dastmalchian and

representatives from Amal and Hezbollah.<sup>751</sup> However, it broke down after 16 hours the next afternoon. Concurrently, Ghazi Kan'an arrived in Beirut to meet with Nabih Berri and later appealed to Sheikh Fadlallah to rein in Hezbollah. Kan'an proposed a ceasefire agreement, and the deployment of Syrian troops in the southern suburbs to separate the rival militias. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholislam also arrived from Iran in an attempt to negotiate a truce. By now, fighting had spread to most areas of south Beirut, with Hezbollah making significant inroads.<sup>752</sup>

For the next several days, the fighting raged on, punctuated by shortlived ceasefires, arranged by Iranian and Syrian mediators, almost on a daily basis. Kan'an and Berri pushed for the cessation of hostilities, followed by the withdrawal of all militiamen from the streets of the southern suburbs and deployment of Syrian troops.<sup>753</sup> However Hezbollah was reluctant to accept Damascus' plan on two counts. Firstly, the presence of the Syrian army in the suburbs would provide Assad with a strategic advantage in Hezbollah's domain.<sup>754</sup> Secondly, Hezbollah had succeeded during the course of six days of intensive combat in expelling Amal from almost 80% of south Beirut.<sup>755</sup> Having gained the upper hand, Hezbollah calculated that it was more advantageous to continue its advances in order to obtain better terms from the Syrians and Amal, within the framework of quadripartite talks also involving Iran. Its primary goal was to arrive at a quid pro quo arrangement whereby it would offer concessions in the suburbs in exchange for a renewed Hezbollah presence in southern Lebanon.<sup>756</sup> Iran for the most part was sympathetic with these aims. While it strove to prove itself a valuable intermediary between the two sides, it was also keen to contain the bloodshed and ensure that it would not cause irreparable damage to its bilateral ties with Syria.

By May 11, after heavy fighting that had cost more than 150 lives and 550 wounded, Hezbollah was indisputably on the ascendant. It had overrun the Amal headquarters in Bourj al-Barajneh (linking up with Arafat loyalists in the area), and consolidated its hold over the districts of Hayy Madi, Haret Hraik, Bir al-Abed and Hayy Muawwad.<sup>757</sup> Amal forces had been pushed into a narrow area on the western edge of the suburbs, only in control of the Chiyah district and parts of Ghubaryh.<sup>758</sup> Frustrated by the inability to impose a truce, and alarmed by the prospect of a complete Amal rout in the fighting, Kan'an that same day threatened that, unless calm was restored, Syrian forces would have to intervene to restore order.<sup>759</sup> Iran for its part became deeply concerned about a possible Syrian military intervention on the side of Amal and its implications. Consequently, Iranian President Khamene'i immediately called his Syrian counterpart to discuss the intra-Shi'ite feuding, and how to halt the violence.<sup>760</sup> Afterwards, on the same day, the quadripartite committee met at the Iranian embassy in Beirut and reached a ceasefire agreement.<sup>761</sup> The parties agreed that the ceasefire would be followed by the evacuation of wounded, exchange of prisoners and withdrawal of fighters from the streets. As part of the agreement, a joint security force composed of Syrian soldiers, Iranian Revolutionary Guards and

militiamen from Amal and Hezbollah began to patrol the southern suburbs in the early hours of May 12 to supervise and monitor the ceasefire. That evening the quadripartite committee reconvened at the Iranian embassy to follow up matters.<sup>762</sup>

The committee tried to conclude a durable arrangement whereby Amal and Hezbollah could finally reach some sort of *modus vivendi*. Assad was performing a delicate balancing act at this stage, since he was facing a predicament similar to that of his Iranian allies. Although he wanted to enhance his position in Lebanon, even if it meant curbing Hezbollah, the question of severing longstanding links with Iran did not enter his mind. In fact, both Syria and Iran were eager to resolve the crisis in an expeditious manner, in part for fear that the fallout might have a harmful impact on their bilateral relations. However, both sides had divergent views on re-establishing the status quo ante. For Hezbollah and Iran, it meant returning to the situation prior to the April clashes in southern Lebanon, when Hezbollah had a sizeable presence in the region. In sharp contrast, Amal and Syria interpreted it as restoration of the status quo in south Beirut only and steadfastly refused to accept a renewed Hezbollah presence in southern Lebanon.<sup>763</sup>

As the quadripartite negotiations became deadlocked, Syria's nightmare scenario began to unfold in subsequent days. Unable to convince Amal to meet their demands, Hezbollah and Iran seemed to have calculated that they could obtain favorable terms only by pressing the initiative and backing Amal into a corner. On May 13, less than 48 hours after the ceasefire, Hezbollah fighters resumed the offensive, pushing towards the outer perimeter of the suburbs and Beirut airport. They overran the Awzai district and seized control of the highway connecting the airport to the capital, as Amal militiamen fell back.<sup>764</sup> They neared a Syrian military encampment and drew fire from Syrian troops stationed at a checkpoint guarding the highway. In the ensuing melee, at least five Hezbollah fighters and one Syrian soldier were killed, and others were wounded.<sup>765</sup> Brigadier Ali Hammoud warned that Syrian forces would "eradicate any militia presence" in areas already under their control, while Sheikh Fadlallah asserted that it was up to Hezbollah's 5,000 fighters to preserve an "Islamic presence" in Lebanon.<sup>766</sup> In order to defuse tensions, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholislam met with Hammoud on the 13th. That evening, there was another reprise in the fighting, but the hostilities resumed by the 15th, with Hezbollah achieving further gains.<sup>767</sup> In Damascus, the Syrian leadership considered its options as its primary Lebanese ally was on the verge of defeat.

As the situation seemed to be spiralling out of control, with Hezbollah advancing in the northern section of the southern suburbs and Amal facing certain defeat, Syria decided to prepare for a military intervention in south Beirut, regardless of the reaction this could elicit from the Iranians or the Maronites.<sup>768</sup> By now, six ceasefires arranged by Iran and Syria had collapsed, leaving Hezbollah in control of most of the twenty square kilometers that constituted the southern suburbs. More than 1,100 people had been killed or wounded in eight of the bloodiest days in the Lebanese Civil War.<sup>769</sup> Nevertheless, Berri continued to reject Hezbollah offers to relinquish

control of certain areas to Amal in return for a foothold in southern Lebanon.<sup>770</sup> His forces fell back south and west towards Syrian-controlled areas.<sup>771</sup>

On May 15, Ghazi Kan'an announced that Syria had no alternative but to enter the suburbs in order to spare its 600,000 inhabitants from death and destruction and impose law and order.<sup>772</sup> Already, a force of 5-7 thousand Syrian troops supported by armor under the command of General Bairakdar had descended on West Beirut from the Shouf Mountains on the 14th, and was poised to enter the sprawling slums and shanty town area of Dahiya.<sup>773</sup> By now, Damascus' main concern was to salvage Amal's position, while Tehran was worried about the possibility of a full-scale confrontation between Hezbollah and the Syrian forces.<sup>774</sup> Prior to Kan'an's announcement, as additional Syrian forces poured into West Beirut, Damascus dispatched a senior intelligence officer to Tehran for 24 hours to inform Iranian officials of the planned intervention and discuss the fate of the Western hostages held in Dahiya.<sup>775</sup> In effect, Assad had already reached a decision to intervene without consulting Iran.<sup>776</sup>

Tehran reacted immediately by sending two more envoys, Deputy Foreign Minister Besharati and Revolutionary Guards Minister Rafiqdoust, to Syria and Lebanon on May 15 to dissuade Syria from entering Dahiya.<sup>777</sup> The next day, while Sheikholislam met with Hafez Assad, Besharati held talks with Faruq al-Shara, and Rafiqdoust conferred with other Syrian officials.<sup>778</sup> The purpose of Rafiqdoust's mission was to formulate mutually agreeable security measures in order to introduce and maintain a ceasefire.<sup>779</sup> Earlier, Besharati had visited Fadlallah in Beirut to discuss the Syrian intervention. In parallel, a Hezbollah delegation had met with Kan'an, who assured them that the Syrian move was not aimed at curbing Hezbollah, and that both Shi'ite militias would be treated on an equal footing.<sup>780</sup> Although both Hezbollah and Iranian officials stated that in principle they had no objections to the Syrian entry, they were desperately trying to seek a formula that would prevent or, at the very least, delay such action.<sup>781</sup> Iran was attempting to gain a valuable victory by ensuring Hezbollah's continued existence and its freedom to wage war on the Israeli and SLA forces in the south, without jeopardizing its alliance with Syria. Damascus on the other hand was looking for a way to save its most important Lebanese proxy in order to establish a Pax Syriana, and at the same time preserve links with its Persian partner.<sup>782</sup>

There was intense Syrian and Iranian diplomatic activity between May 14 and 17 to prevent the planned deployment from turning into a confrontation with Iran's clients.<sup>783</sup> It should be underscored that neither side was interested in precipitating a direct confrontation for fear of its broader implications. Indeed, throughout the Amal-Hezbollah fighting, the two allies, especially Syria, stressed the continued importance they attached to their "strategic alliance."<sup>784</sup>

It was quite evident that, behind closed doors, the Iranian envoys were voicing their vehement opposition to Syria's planned intervention. Intense Iranian displeasure, and the prospect of a costly confrontation with Hezbollah that could bleed the Syrians and endanger the lives of the Western hostages, eventually convinced Assad to hold back and try to find a political solution.<sup>785</sup>

Moreover, Hezbollah explicitly warned the Syrians that the Western hostages would be killed if their troops entered the southern suburbs.<sup>786</sup> Following a telephone conversation between Assad and Khamene'i, and consultations between Besharati and al-Shara on May 16, Besharati rushed to Beirut and held talks that evening with Ghazi Kan'an at the Iranian embassy.<sup>787</sup> Afterwards, they announced an agreement had been reached to reconvene the quadripartite committee, which met immediately in order to establish a ceasefire and hold further negotiations aimed at reaching a comprehensive arrangement to end the Amal-Hezbollah dispute.<sup>788</sup> As a direct consequence of these developments, the seventh ceasefire went into effect that night.

The next day, fighting erupted once more, as Hezbollah pushed Amal back even further and the death toll mounted to more than 250.<sup>789</sup> Despite this setback, Besharati stated that a Syrian deployment would only complicate matters. He asserted they were "in total agreement with the Syrian brothers...desiring the implementation of the ceasefire and withdrawal of militamen from the suburbs."<sup>790</sup> The Syrians, however reluctantly, seemed to have acceded to Iranian demands to give diplomacy a chance, as Kan'an also voiced approval of political negotiations.<sup>791</sup> He expressed hope that peace and security could be achieved "through political means."<sup>792</sup> Implicitly acknowledging Damascus' dilemma, Kan'an elucidated that Syria "has decided to postpone its entry into the suburbs to allow its political efforts to run their course...we want to establish balanced relations with all parties."<sup>793</sup>

As the clashes continued, Berri travelled to Damascus, where he pleaded with Assad for Syrian intervention. The Syrian leader purportedly pledged that his forces would step in to rescue Amal and restore order.<sup>794</sup> As Amal's position continued to deteriorate, the political wrangling between Iran and Syria intensified as Besharati maintained his firm opposition to Syrian plans to enter Dahiya. Furthermore, he insisted that, in the event troops had to be deployed, their presence would have to be restricted to neighborhoods controlled by Amal. Hezbollah also emphasized that it would not disarm as part of any ceasefire agreement.<sup>795</sup> Both demands partially reflected concerns that Amal gunmen would return with the deployment of Syrian peacekeepers and exploit their presence to settle scores with their Shi'ite rivals.<sup>796</sup> From the Syrian standpoint, the fact that Hezbollah now controlled almost 90% of the southern suburbs, and refused to disarm under any circumstances, rendered the Iranian demand for a limited deployment unacceptable.

As the negotiations continued at a feverish pace, Iranian officials also sought guarantees that Syria would safeguard Hezbollah's presence in Beirut, especially its social and religious institutions and medical facilities - the hallmarks of Tehran's influence among the Lebanese Shi'ites.<sup>797</sup> In view of the favorable situation on the ground for Hezbollah, Iran and its client continued to put forth new proposals and additional demands to maximize their leverage and extract more concessions from Syria and Amal. Indeed, this continued to be a recurrent pattern in the quadripartite negotiations for the next ten days, until the crisis was finally resolved on May 26. After constant haggling, each time the parties seemed close to reaching a comprehensive



agreement, the Iranians would insert new conditions, much to the dismay and exasperation of the Syrians.<sup>798</sup>

The renewed clashes on May 17 prompted Besharati and Kan'an to hold another meeting, with both parties concurring on the need to end the fighting through a political settlement.<sup>799</sup> Iran also asked for guarantees that 300 Revolutionary Guards in the suburbs would be given safe passage once the hostilities had ended.<sup>800</sup> After their deliberations, Besharati reiterated at a press conference that there was complete convergence in the positions of the two allies, and a Syrian deployment was unnecessary.<sup>801</sup> At the same time, the Amal leadership grew increasingly disillusioned by the conduct of its patron, fearing that in the high-stakes game of regional power politics, Damascus could very well sacrifice Amal in order to preserve its relations with Iran. As Hezbollah continued to tighten the noose around Amal, Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas hurried to Beirut on May 18 for consultations with Ghazi Kan'an to assess the possibility for armed intervention. Frustrated by what he saw as Hezbollah and Iranian intransigence, Tlas struck a defiant note by declaring that Syria would "not permit any gambling over Lebanon's Arab future."<sup>802</sup> He also stressed that the decision to intervene made four days earlier was "still in effect."<sup>803</sup> Tlas inspected Syrian units in Beirut and called on them to "remain fully prepared," since entry into Dahiya was only a question of time.<sup>804</sup> Reportedly, the Syrian Defense Minister had initially been predisposed to send in Syrian forces to halt the hostilities, but Kan'an persuaded him that such a move would only lead to a bloodbath that would tie down their forces in a costly and protracted conflict in Lebanon, and possibly sound the death knell of the Syrian-Iranian alliance.<sup>805</sup>

Although fringe elements within both the Syrian and Iranian regimes advocated advancing their respective agendas in Lebanon, even if ultimately at the expense of their nine-year-old alliance, the prevailing view among the ruling circles in Damascus and Tehran was that prudence dictated a compromise solution would have to be reached in order to preserve their strategic ties. In essence, the Amal-Hezbollah crisis of May 1988 demonstrated beyond doubt that the Syrian-Iranian relationship had matured and evolved into a stable, durable, regional axis. It represented a major milestone, signifying the consolidation of the Tehran-Damascus nexus.

At this point, the stakes were quite high for Syria and Iran. Despite the critical nature of the situation in Lebanon, both players had to look at the broader picture and evaluate their longer-term interests, on both the regional and international level. Neither side had a strong desire, nor indeed any interest, in precipitating a direct Syrian-Hezbollah confrontation.<sup>806</sup> For Assad, American and Maronite refusal to cooperate with him in a constructive manner to establish a new order in Lebanon, and the sudden collapse of the Amal position in Beirut (exposing the pro-Syrian movement's decrepitude and fragmented structure), meant that he was left with few allies and had lost the buffer through which he could operate in Lebanon.<sup>807</sup> Consequently, his room for political maneuvering had become markedly restricted. The Syrian leader now needed Iranian cooperation more than ever to control events in his backyard. The Syrians knew that, if vital national security

interests were at stake, Hezbollah could probably be crushed if they committed at least 15,000 elite troops to such an undertaking.<sup>808</sup> However, on balance, Syrian interests militated against such a move.

In the overall picture, the suppression of the pro-Iranian fundamentalists would not necessarily strengthen Assad's hand in Lebanon at this stage, and would undoubtedly strain relations with Tehran. In addition, Damascus was well aware that a Syrian-Hezbollah confrontation in Beirut and elsewhere in Lebanon that would potentially bog down its forces and bleed both sides would be looked upon favorably by Tel Aviv and Washington.<sup>809</sup> In terms of regional power politics, the Syrians calculated that a rupture in their relations with Iran would leave them more vulnerable, at a time when Iraq was beginning to reassert itself for the first time in more than six years and would seize any chance to mete out retribution for its Ba'thi rival's stalwart support of its Iranian foe.<sup>810</sup> Moreover, Assad realized that time was of the essence, and he had to act in an expeditious manner to end the intra-Shi'ite feuding before the opening of the Arab summit on June 7 in Algiers. He hoped to defuse the crisis in order to stabilize the situation in Lebanon and restore relations with Iran to a firm footing. The Syrian leader knew that his partnership with revolutionary Iran was a key asset in dealing with other Arab states and trying to gain their political and financial support. Assad was therefore keen to play his "Iran card" in Algiers to obtain concessions and shore up his regional position.<sup>811</sup>

Tehran was also eager to preserve its strategic ties with Damascus. Although Lebanon had been a primary focus of Iranian efforts to export the Islamic revolution, the clerical regime was conscious that, to date, its inroads in Lebanon were only achieved because of the active cooperation or acquiescence of the Syrian government. Lebanon had gained greater importance in ideological terms, now that Tehran realized it could not succeed in toppling the Iraqi regime; however, on the regional level, the alliance with Syria still remained the most vital component in Iran's Arab policy. Overall, the Iranians believed that some sort of accommodation would have to be reached with Syria over south Beirut that would leave Hezbollah with either some of its newly-acquired gains or restore its rights in southern Lebanon. This was preferable to adopting an uncompromising stance that could lead to an all-out Syrian-Hezbollah confrontation, and possibly the total eradication of Hezbollah. Such a development would translate into considerable loss of Iran's political, military and financial investment in the Shi'ite community since 1982 and deal a devastating blow to Syrian-Iranian relations.<sup>812</sup> In sum, despite the importance Iran attached to its foothold in Lebanon to ensure the future of revolutionary Islam, its growing weakness and isolation on the regional and international level meant that perpetuating the friendship with Syria figured first and foremost in the minds of Iran's leaders.<sup>813</sup> Both Syria and Iran were determined to maintain their strategic axis and present a common front, regardless of the obstacles they faced in resolving their differences. Hence, throughout the May crisis, as the two sides conducted long, arduous negotiations (marked by constant wrangling over details), they diligently pursued this painstaking

process almost on a daily basis for three weeks against the backdrop of the clashes and carnage only a few miles away.

As the fighting entered its second week, with casualties continuing to mount, and Amal desperately trying to cling to its shrinking foothold in south Beirut, the quadripartite talks continued. Iran now began to soften its stance on the introduction of a Syrian force, but along with Hezbollah, argued that, if a political solution could be reached, the deployment would be unnecessary.<sup>814</sup> Both Besharati and Kan'an continued to support the search for a negotiated settlement, while Berri insisted on immediate Syrian intervention to save the day for his battered militia.<sup>815</sup> Besharati hinted that a Syrian entry would require "further discussion" and "preliminary steps" that would satisfy Iranian concerns.<sup>816</sup> In other words, Syria would have to meet certain Iranian demands and give specific guarantees regarding Hezbollah's future before a compromise could be reached. In tandem, both Syria and Hezbollah made conciliatory statements and denied that the intra-Shi'ite feuding had caused a rift between them. In an interview with *Le Monde*, Kan'an praised Hezbollah's struggle against the Israeli occupation and emphasized that the fundamentalist movement was not an obstacle to Syrian efforts to find an equitable national solution in Lebanon.<sup>817</sup> Sheikh Fadlallah asserted that Hezbollah fighters would not resist a Syrian entry into the suburbs if they received assurances that they would not be disarmed. He underscored that the movement must continue to exist as a viable political and military force in the future.<sup>818</sup> Fadlallah also pointed out that the Syrian army and Hezbollah co-existed peacefully in the Bekaa Valley.<sup>819</sup> A statement released by Hezbollah reiterated that there was no dispute with the Syrians, and "the doors of the suburbs are not closed to them."<sup>820</sup>

Intensive negotiations continued between the two regional allies as Iranian President Khamene'i sent another message dealing with the crisis to his Syrian counterpart, conveyed by Besharati to Assad during a meeting on May 19.<sup>821</sup> It was quite apparent that something was afoot as Kan'an returned to Damascus that evening and Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholislam was dispatched once more to the Syrian capital the next day.<sup>822</sup> Sheikholislam met with Assad upon arrival and passed on another message from Khamene'i, while Besharati returned to Beirut to hold further talks with Amal and Hezbollah representatives.<sup>823</sup> Following deliberations in Damascus, both Kan'an and Sheikholislam proceeded to Beirut on May 21, where quadripartite negotiations also involving Besharati, Hammoud and the representatives from the two militias now entered a new stage. The parties managed to forge a consensus on key issues, and the ninth ceasefire went into effect.<sup>824</sup> As the fighting died down, and Hezbollah temporarily eased some of the pressure on Amal, it became clear that Syria and Iran had reached a understanding on allowing Hezbollah to remain armed and continue to function as a political force in Lebanon, while the Western hostages would not be released without certain demands being met.<sup>825</sup> However, as in the past, just as the two sides seemed close to reaching an understanding, paving the way for the deployment of Syrian troops, Iran once again raised the stakes by inserting a new condition. At a six-hour meeting of the

quadrupartite committee held on the night of May 21-22 in West Beirut, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholislam - along with Hezbollah officials - insisted on the creation of a joint Syrian-Iranian security force for the southern suburbs, as opposed to only a Syrian peacekeeping contingent. Hammoud and Amal officials rejected the demand outright, arguing that it was "out of the question" and that the composition of the security force was non-negotiable.<sup>826</sup>

While Syria was keen to maintain its valuable links with Iran, and to preserve cooperative ties with Hezbollah in order to use it to control events in Lebanon, it was nonetheless determined that certain lines it had drawn would not be crossed and that, if certain interests were at stake, other parties would not dictate terms in its backyard. Despite its willingness to accommodate Iran and Hezbollah on key issues, it was unwavering in its predilection to be the ultimate arbiter in Lebanon. Damascus' stance was accurately articulated by Vice-President Khaddam, who stated:

"We greatly value our alliance with Iran, but our regional allies must respect our position...our role [in Lebanon] is above all other considerations. In their operations, our allies should pay attention to our interests and to those of our [Lebanese] friends. The movements of some [Lebanese] have become a threat to the Syrian role. We shall not allow the creation of complications in the Lebanese arena."<sup>827</sup>

The quadrupartite negotiations continued two more days, but had already become deadlocked once again, as Syria refused to give ground on the composition of the peacekeeping force. Moreover, in spite of Syrian assurances that Hezbollah would be allowed to maintain a political presence in Beirut and its fighters would be permitted to keep their arms, no progress was achieved on the issue of allowing the pro-Iranian militia to resume its guerrilla operations in the occupied south. By May 24, the ceasefire broke down as Hezbollah resumed its assault.<sup>828</sup> In parallel with the political track, Iran calculated that further gains on the ground by its clients at the expense of Amal would force Syria to re-evaluate its position and grant Hezbollah's demands. As fierce fighting re-erupted, Amal, which now controlled about 10% of Dahiya, lost more ground as it was pushed out of the Ghubaryh quarter and clung desperately to Chiyah, its only remaining foothold.<sup>829</sup> Amal issued a statement accusing Iranian Revolutionary Guards and PLO fighters of directing and assisting Hezbollah operations and acknowledged its losses in Ghubaryh. The pro-Syrian militia was now in an extremely vulnerable and precarious position, controlling less than 10% of the southern suburbs. Hezbollah forces now occupied seven of the eight quarters in south Beirut.<sup>830</sup>

With Amal now on the verge of total defeat in Beirut, and Iran and Hezbollah hardening their position, Assad decided to act in a swift and decisive manner to prevent a debacle in Dahiya. The next day, May 25, as Nabih Berri and Salim al-Hoss hurried to Damascus once more to plead with Khaddam for military intervention to end the violence, Assad received a high-ranking Hezbollah delegation at his summer palace in the seaside resort of Latakia.<sup>831</sup> It was an extraordinary step, since the Syrian leader had invited the four Hezbollah representatives to his

residence for direct talks. The mere fact that no Iranian representatives were present was a testimony to the growing independence of the Shi'ite movement. After three hours of negotiations, a five-point agreement was reached, paving the way for the Syrian entry into the suburbs and at the same time leaving Hezbollah assets intact. It stipulated that the Syrian army would be stationed throughout the suburbs, Hezbollah and Amal gunmen would be withdrawn from the streets, both Shi'ite groups could maintain political and information offices in the suburbs, Hezbollah fighters and Iranian Revolutionary Guards would have to withdraw to the Hayy Madi barracks, the pro-Iranians could only deploy fighters along the Green Line with East Beirut and Syrian troops would be replaced by Lebanese gendarmes within several weeks.<sup>832</sup> Although not specified, there was an implicit understanding that Hezbollah would be allowed to resume guerrilla operations in the occupied south.<sup>833</sup>

The deal was approved the next day by the quadripartite committee in Beirut.<sup>834</sup> Syrian Information Minister Mohammed Salman officially announced news of the breakthrough. Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholislam expressed satisfaction that joint efforts with Syria to end the fighting had finally borne fruit, while Sheikh Fadlallah pointed out that the agreement had been "crafted in a manner to save face for all parties concerned."<sup>835</sup> Upon his return from Damascus on May 26, a relieved Nabih Berri stated that the Syrians would commence their deployment the very next day, Friday, May 27.<sup>836</sup> Indeed, Ghazi Kan'an also arrived in Beirut the same day in order to supervise the operation.<sup>837</sup>

As news of the agreement spread, the fighting rapidly receded, and militiamen from both sides disappeared from the streets. The clashes in Dahiya had been some of the most vicious in Lebanon's thirteen-year-old civil war. During the three-week-long gunbattles, more than 300 people died, over 1,000 were wounded, and some 400,000 civilians fled their homes in south Beirut.<sup>838</sup>

Around 11 a.m. on the morning of May 27, the first detachment of 800 Syrian soldiers backed by 100 Lebanese gendarmes entered the southern suburbs to enforce the ceasefire agreement, thus officially ending the 22-day Amal-Hezbollah confrontation. By now the militiamen had completely disappeared from the streets. As a consequence the deployment went quite smoothly, with local inhabitants warmly welcoming the peacekeeping forces.<sup>839</sup> At a Friday sermon in Beirut, Fadlallah called on his followers to cooperate fully to ensure the successful implementation of the new security plan, while the Iranian embassy also issued a statement to the same effect.<sup>840</sup> The second and last phase of the deployment was completed by the second day as 3,500 Syrian troops fanned out and took up positions throughout Dahiya, without any major incident.<sup>841</sup> By June 1, as a result of Iranian mediation, Hezbollah had turned over 200 Amal prisoners captured during the fighting to the Syrian peacekeepers, and Amal had freed 58 Hezbollah captives. Berri also promised the release of all Lebanese and Palestinians in Amal custody.<sup>842</sup>

Assad had prevailed in demonstrating his indispensability and crucial role as the final arbiter and interlocutor in Lebanese affairs to all sides.<sup>843</sup> With Syria asserting control over Dahiya by late May, it again tried to link its policy of limiting the power and influence of Hezbollah and securing the release of the foreign hostages to US diplomatic assistance to bridge the gap between Damascus and East Beirut's position on the presidential elections. As Syrian troops completed their deployment on May 29 and set up checkpoints around the pro-Iranian quarter of Bir El-Abed, the Syrian Information Minister indicated his government's disenchantment with Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces and underscored that Syria would "not tolerate the presence of parties that collaborate with Israel."<sup>844</sup> He warned extremist elements on both sides of the fence that any party that attempted to deepen divisions in Beirut would be "removed from the arena."<sup>845</sup> Assad's ability to cut a deal with Iran and Hezbollah that opened the way for Syrian control of the southern suburbs, and simultaneously strengthened his hand in Beirut without endangering the lives of the Western hostages, did not go unnoticed in Washington. In fact, the Reagan administration reacted positively and, following the Superpower summit in Moscow, US Secretary of State Shultz arrived in Damascus and held talks with Assad on June 6. Although both the Syrians and Americans seemed to favor General Michel Aoun, Commander of the Lebanese Army, to succeed Amin Gemayel as president, both men were overshadowed by Geagea, who held enormous sway in the Maronite community.<sup>846</sup>

Overall, the Amal-Hezbollah confrontation and the ensuing crisis demonstrated the strength and maturity of the Syrian-Iranian relationship. In spite of three long weeks of tortuous and painstaking negotiations marked by incessant wrangling over guarantees and conditions, and the prospect of a forceful Syrian entry to crush Hezbollah, neither Syria nor Iran seriously considered ending their alliance. Both sides continued to value their partnership and, moreover, displayed confidence in their ability to consult and negotiate continuously in order to find some common ground to resolve the crisis. Assad refrained from confronting Hezbollah not only for fear of sinking deeper into the Lebanese quagmire and jeopardizing the lives of the hostages, but more importantly, out of deference to Iran, whose influence and backing were needed to control events in Lebanon and contain Iraq on the regional level.<sup>847</sup> His conciliatory policy towards Hezbollah fed into his strategy to secure its support for his future designs in Lebanon and strengthen relations with Iran to thwart his regional rivals. Indeed, Assad's strategy paid off several months later, subsequent to the end of the Gulf War, as the struggle in Lebanon over Gemayel's succession intensified. The Syrians relied heavily on Iran and Hezbollah to crush Aoun's anti-Syrian rebellion in 1988-89, which received support from Iraq and Israel.

From Tehran's standpoint, despite its determination to boost its position in Lebanon, there was never any doubt that, if it had to choose between this endeavor and the axis with Syria, the former would be abandoned. Iran's support for Hezbollah during the crisis was a calculated move to enhance its position in the Levant and safeguard its proxy's future. The clerical regime did not

seriously contemplate severing its links with Damascus. With Iraq on the ascendant in the Gulf, and the Algiers summit approaching, Iran acquiesced to the Syrian intervention and Hezbollah relinquishing control of Dahiya as part of an overall understanding that guaranteed its continued influence in Lebanon and left Hezbollah's assets untouched. Iran needed Syria and had no illusions about challenging its Arab ally in its own backyard.<sup>848</sup>

### **REGIONAL DIPLOMATIC MOVES AND THE END OF THE PERSIAN GULF WAR**

Following the peaceful resolution of the Amal-Hezbollah confrontation in Lebanon, the Syrians prepared to participate in the Algiers summit to show their support and solidarity with the Palestinian intifada (the main item on the agenda). At the same time, amidst the myriad of reports and speculation in Western and Arab capitals and the news media during the May crisis that the Syrian-Iranian alliance was at a breaking point, some members of the pro-Iraq camp, most notably Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, reckoned that the opportune moment had arrived to try once more to prise Syria and Iran apart. Indeed, during the heat of the May crisis, there had been reports that Hafez Assad and King Fahd had spoken over the telephone on several occasions.<sup>849</sup> In view of Riyadh's decision to sever diplomatic links with Iran in late April, intensify its propaganda war against Tehran and facilitate Iraqi aerial attacks on Iranian assets in the Gulf, the contacts between the Syrian and Saudi leaders had aroused suspicions that something was afoot. Against the backdrop of what many had perceived as the most severe crisis in Syrian-Iranian relations, Syria's political isolation in the Arab world, Iran's inability to meet the combined US-Iraqi challenge in the Persian Gulf and Iraq's string of battlefield successes in the land war, many surmised that the Damascus-Tehran axis could collapse with an appropriate push. However, this was not to be the case.

As stated earlier, the ability of both Syria and Iran to manage the May crisis; by conducting protracted negotiations over a three-week period, and to reach a mutually acceptable arrangement to end the Amal-Hezbollah clashes signified that the alliance had matured and become more solid. Syria needed Iran to control events in Lebanon and, despite the sudden resurgence of Iraqi power in the Gulf, a rapprochement with Baghdad was not an idea that was being seriously entertained in Damascus. Furthermore, Syria and Iran had concluded another one-year oil agreement in late April, whereby Damascus would continue to receive one million tons of Iranian crude free of charge, which translated into 20,000 b/d.<sup>850</sup> It is important to note that, by this stage, the importance of Iranian oil deliveries was beginning to recede on Damascus' agenda and no longer served as a bone of contention between the allies. With the Dayr al-Zawr oil fields gradually coming on stream, Syria was achieving self-sufficiency for its domestic oil requirements during 1988 and was expected to have a comfortable surplus by 1989.<sup>851</sup> Consequently, foreign oil supplies - whether from Iran or elsewhere - were no longer a major long-term consideration in Syrian foreign policy formulation. By now, the oil factor was not a prominent element in Assad's

calculations to maintain cooperative links with Khomeini's Iran. The maintenance of the alliance was now based on common political and strategic objectives, not economic or financial considerations. In view of the relatively better economic outlook for Syria, the political importance of the Palestinian intifada in the Arab world and the diminution of the Iranian threat in the Gulf, the Syrian leader believed that he had greater room for maneuver at the upcoming Algiers summit and decided to attend personally in order to exploit the evolving regional situation.

In sharp contrast to the Amman summit, where the main topic on the agenda had been the Gulf War, seven months later, when the Algiers meeting was convened, the eruption of the Palestinian uprising and Iraq's ability to reverse the situation and score notable gains in the Gulf theater meant that the focus was shifting back to the Arab-Israeli arena. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict would constitute the most important item on the conference agenda. As a result, Assad was in a less precarious position and could put forth a more convincing case for greater Arab assistance, in view of his stalwart opposition to Israeli policies in the Levant. Although the summit did not, as had been the case in Amman, mark a major turning point in inter-Arab politics, with Egypt's de facto re-entry into the Arab fold, it was important in symbolic terms and was not devoid of controversy. Eighteen of the 21 members of the Arab League were represented at the four-day summit by their heads of state. Only the leaders of Somalia, Oman and Iraq failed to attend. Saddam Hussein sent Taha Yasin Ramadan in his stead, since he was still "needed in the confrontation theater."<sup>852</sup>

Due to the centrality of the Palestinian issue on this occasion, and Arafat's assertiveness, both Hafez Assad and King Hussein avoided open confrontation with the PLO chairman. While the first two closed sessions of the conference dealt with the Palestinian uprising, during the third session on June 9, developments in the Gulf region were also discussed. The Iraqi delegation tried to corner the Syrians, with Ramadan reiterating Iraq's dissatisfaction with Syria's stance and declaring that "Iranian aggression is parallel to the Zionist aggression, is similar to it, and is its partner."<sup>853</sup> As in the past, the Iraqis tried to portray the war as a pan-Arab conflict against Iran and moved for the inclusion of passages strongly critical of Iran in the text of the final communiqué. Syria, along with Algeria and Libya, tried to thwart these efforts. During the session, Assad objected to any anti-Iranian amendments; a move which Ramadan later described as "impudent." However after a bilateral meeting between the Syrian leader and King Fahd, and further deliberations involving Assad and a number of other Gulf heads of state, Assad acceded to their requests to go along with the passage of a final communiqué that condemned Iranian conduct and condoned Iraq's recovery of territories occupied in the Gulf War.<sup>854</sup> Moreover, there were indications that the GCC states provided financial inducements for Syria's acquiescence as a frontline state against Israel. Some reports stated that Damascus was promised an aid package totaling \$250 million, while others claimed that each donor would decide how much to contribute on its own.<sup>855</sup> In the end, despite certain objections to the wording of the final statement, the Syrians



did not express any formal reservations nor oppose its passage.<sup>856</sup> The communiqué criticized Iran's "intransigence" for continuing the hostilities, threatening the Gulf states, occupying Arab land and refusing to comply with UN Security Council Resolution 598. It went on to express "full solidarity" with Iraq for its adherence to pan-Arab responsibilities, including its defense of "pan-Arab security and Arab land." The participants also reaffirmed their support for Saudi and Kuwaiti actions to defend themselves in the face of Iranian subversion.<sup>857</sup>

In the aftermath of the Algier summit, Syrian state-controlled media welcomed renewed Arab attention to the Arab-Israeli conflict and additional support for the frontline states. At the same time, it emphasized that Syria had disagreed with the anti-Iranian sections of the final statement.<sup>858</sup> Despite the fact that Damascus went along with the Arab League's condemnation of Tehran, it did not deviate from its previous policy of maintaining and expanding cooperative links with its non-Arab ally. Both in Amman and Algiers, Syria did not try to swim against the strong anti-Iranian current, and paid lip-service to the pro-Iraqi bloc by endorsing its position. However, it refused to abandon its strategic relationship with Iran. In early July, the Emir of Kuwait dispatched his foreign minister, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Jabir, to Baghdad and Damascus to hold talks with the leaders of both states in a bid to mend the Syrian-Iraqi rift, but this initiative failed to bear fruit, as had been the case with previous mediation efforts.<sup>859</sup>

Two major developments in the first half of July finally persuaded the entire Iranian leadership, including Ayatollah Khomeini, to sue for peace. On July 3, the US Navy cruiser *USS Vincennes*, operating near the Straits of Hormuz, entered Iranian territorial waters and challenged two Iranian gunboats. The *USS Vincennes* fired on them, and in the ensuing engagement it shot down a commercial airliner, Iran Air 655 (flying in the vicinity on a regular, scheduled flight from Bandar Abbas to Dubai), mistaking it for an Iranian F-14 warplane. Two hundred and ninety passengers and crew died when the aircraft was struck by two missiles fired from the US vessel.<sup>860</sup>

While Washington expressed regret about the tragic incident, it defended its policy in the Gulf. Ronald Reagan described the event as an "understandable accident" and argued that the *USS Vincennes* had acted in self-defense while under attack.<sup>861</sup> Washington immediately engaged in an extensive disinformation campaign to conceal the truth about the incident.<sup>862</sup>

While Tehran angrily lashed out at Washington, wildly accusing it of "premeditated murder," the incident came as a profound shock to the clerical regime and the people, highlighting the formidable nature of the forces arrayed against them.<sup>863</sup> Furthermore, the mild international reaction to the incident no doubt came as a bitter disappointment, exposing Iran's isolation and weakness.<sup>864</sup> The reaction in the Arab world was for the most part neutral, or critical of Iran. Only Syria and Libya harshly condemned the US government. Damascus called it a "criminal act" and one of the "ugliest forms of terrorism." It expressed its condolences and solidarity with the Iranian government and families of the victims.<sup>865</sup>

The destruction of Iran Air 655, coupled with Iraq's military victories on land and US-Iraqi efforts to neutralize Iranian power in the Gulf, compounded the sense of helplessness already felt in Tehran. In tandem with the heightened tensions in the Gulf, Iraq kept up the pressure in the ground war. Less than three weeks after the victory in the Majnoon islands, on July 12, the Iraqi army launched another major offensive northeast of Basra, near the Amarah oilfields, to retake some of the last significant pockets of territory held by Iranian forces. The Iraqis quickly overpowered the Iranian defenders. In addition to recovering their territory, the Iraqis pushed into Iran and temporarily occupied some 1,500 square miles.<sup>866</sup> The next day, Baghdad threatened to invade Iran once again if Iran did not give up its remaining footholds in Iraqi Kurdistan.

By now, Iran had lost virtually all the gains it had made in Iraq since 1984. With the loss of much of its heavy equipment in the recent fighting, Iranian morale was at an all time low. Tehran promptly announced on July 14 that it would oblige and pull back its forces behind the international frontier.<sup>867</sup> Three days later, Ayatollah Khomeini convened an extraordinary meeting involving 40 senior political and military officials to discuss the future of the war. After eight hours of deliberations, the majority persuaded him and the remaining hawks that victory could not be attained on the battlefield and Iran had no recourse but to end the eight-year-old conflict.<sup>868</sup> The next day, on July 18, Ali Khamene'i sent a letter to UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar stating Iran's formal acceptance of Resolution 598.<sup>869</sup> Khomeini, who had been an uncompromising foe of Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi Ba'thi regime, indicated in an address to the nation on July 20 that the decision to end the war had been difficult - one "more deadly than drinking poison." He admitted that he had finally accepted the counsel of his military advisors.<sup>870</sup>

Syria was surprised when Iran accepted Resolution 598, since it had not been consulted or informed prior to Iran's announcement on July 18.<sup>871</sup> Nonetheless, Damascus welcomed Tehran's decision to cease hostilities with Baghdad and condemned its Ba'thi rival once again for having started the war in the first place.<sup>872</sup> Iraq was also caught off guard by Iran's sudden acceptance of a ceasefire, although only a day earlier, on the 20th anniversary of the Iraqi Ba'th's seizure of power, during a speech commemorating the occasion, Saddam Hussein had predicted "the enemy's total collapse this year." In his address he had also expressed gratitude for the pan-Arab support he had received at the Amman and Algiers summits and condemned Syria's "abominable crimes" in Lebanon and betrayal of "Arab solidarity."<sup>873</sup> Sensing that Iranian weakness and vulnerability were at their height, Iraq decided to press the initiative by invading Iran to seize territory in order to bolster its negotiating position. It launched a series of offensives on the central and southern fronts between July 22 and 29, capturing huge swathes of territory, along with men and materiel. Iran fought back desperately and recouped some of its losses during the closing days of July and early August.<sup>874</sup> Ironically, Iran now appealed to the Security Council for support, with Iraq showing contempt for the UN body by ignoring repeated calls to end the fighting and withdraw its forces.<sup>875</sup>

Throughout this period, Syria denounced Iraqi actions and argued that Baghdad's refusal to sue for peace vindicated its stance and proved that the Iraqi regime was determined to "wreak havoc" in the Gulf and divert Arab attention away from the Arab-Israeli theater.<sup>876</sup> Under intense international pressure, Saddam Hussein finally accepted a ceasefire on August 6. A UN observer force of 350 troops was hastily assembled and dispatched to the region. The UN Security Council met subsequently and decided that the ceasefire would officially come into effect on August 20, with Iran and Iraq agreeing to commence peace negotiations under UN auspices in Geneva on August 25.<sup>877</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War, as Iran and Iraq prepared to begin peace talks, there was heightened diplomatic activity in the region on both sides. A week after Iraq agreed to cease hostilities, Velayati left for Damascus and Tripoli to inform their leaders about recent developments and hold consultations with them. He first travelled to Syria to brief Assad and al-Shara on the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 598 and discuss future bilateral cooperation in the emerging regional environment. Reportedly, Assad congratulated Velayati on the decision to end the war, describing it as an opportunity to stabilize the situation and improve their relations.<sup>878</sup> In mid-August, King Hussein, accompanied by a high-level military delegation, visited Baghdad to congratulate Saddam Hussein on his triumph against Iran. The Jordanian monarch was presented with huge quantities of US and British-built tanks and armored vehicles captured from the Iranians, as a token of appreciation for his consistent support of Iraq during the war. He called Iraq's victory a "brilliant chapter in modern Arab history."<sup>879</sup>

In parallel with the diplomatic moves on both sides, there was an intensification of propaganda wars in some quarters, most notably with Baghdad stepping up its attacks on Syria. In an interview with Egypt's *Al-Akhbar* on August 11, Iraqi Deputy Premier Ramadan praised Egyptian support for Iraq during the war and asserted that Egyptian-Iraqi relations served as a model for fraternal ties among Arab states. He contrasted Cairo's backing with Damascus' stance. He accused Syria of betraying the aims and aspirations of the Arab nation by assisting Iran, destroying Lebanon and massacring Palestinians. Ramadan advocated Arab steadfastness against what he called Syria's treachery. Even before peace talks between Iran and Iraq had got underway, Baghdad already signalled its determination to punish Syria for its policies during the Gulf War. For example, an editorial in the Iraqi Ba'th's daily *Al-Thawrah* on August 14 warned that the Syrian regime would soon face the most difficult stage in its history, now that Iraq had emerged victorious from its "holy defensive war." It emphasized that Assad would pay dearly for his treasonous collaboration with the enemies of the Arabs - the Khomeinists and Zionists.

Damascus was equally harsh in its ripostes. It continued to underscore the harm that Baghdad had done to the Arab cause by initiating the Gulf conflict and trying to expand the hostilities to create an Arab-Persian conflict, thereby deflecting attention away from the Palestinian issue. With the cessation of hostilities, Syria now urged other Arab states to follow its example by

deepening Arab-Iranian cooperation to restore unity and confront the "common enemy." The Syrian media predicted that Saddam Hussein would have difficulty keeping his grip on power under peaceful conditions, and would continue to manufacture crises to oppress the Iraqi people and block a satisfactory resolution of outstanding problems with Iran in order to highlight the fabricated Arab-Iranian cleavage. They intimated that Saddam Hussein's fallacy would ultimately confirm what Syria had maintained all along since 1979, that "the Islamic Republic of Iran is a supporter of the Arab cause and not an enemy of the Arabs."<sup>880</sup>

Another sign of the continuation of the Syrian-Iraqi rift was the visit of a high-level Iraqi opposition delegation to Damascus in late August, composed of senior representatives from the Iraqi Communist Party, the Socialist Party of Kurdistan, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party. This was at a time when the Iraqi army had begun a systematic campaign to crush resistance in the Kurdish north, now that the guns had fallen silent along the Iranian front.<sup>881</sup> It was clear that, despite the end of the Iran-Iraq hostilities and the beginning of peace negotiations, the gulf between Baghdad and Damascus remained as wide as ever. All indications were that the rivalry between the two Ba'thi regimes would continue unabated. Concomitantly, Iran's military weakness and diplomatic isolation, combined with the consolidation of the powerful Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi axis (backed by Washington and Riyadh) and the cooling of Syrian-Soviet relations, raised questions in the minds of many about the future viability of the Syrian-Iranian alliance. Many observers concluded that, as Tehran turned inward to put its own house in order, Assad would have to reorder his strategic priorities and reformulate his foreign policy because of the changing calculus of power on both the regional and international stage.

## **CONCLUSION**

By the end of the third phase in the evolution of the Syrian-Iranian axis, during the summer of 1988, the partnership between the two sides had been consolidated. It had been able to survive intra-alliance tensions and serious disputes on numerous occasions between 1985 and 1988. The inherent desire of both regimes to perpetuate their special relationship manifested itself in their common ability to consult one another continuously, particularly at times when their interests diverged, and reach mutually agreeable arrangements. Their ability to withstand serious setbacks, jointly find solutions and compromise on important issues in the Levant and the Persian Gulf during an extremely turbulent period in Lebanese and Gulf politics, spanning more than three years, proved that the Tehran-Damascus axis had matured and become institutionalized. This was demonstrated in their successful handling of the February 1987 and May 1988 crises in Lebanon, Syria's steadfast support for Iran in the aftermath of the Mecca incident and the Amman and Algiers summits.

Despite going through the motions and feigning solidarity with the mainstream Arab states in the two Arab League conferences, Assad continued to support his Iranian ally at a time when it

was losing the initiative in the Gulf and becoming increasingly isolated in the Middle East and the rest of the world. Furthermore, as the importance of Iranian oil shipments decreased, with Syria having boosted its own oil production to achieve self-sufficiency for its internal needs by 1988, only political and strategic considerations were now paramount in maintaining close links with Iran. Damascus calculated that keeping Tehran on its side, rather than going against it, would give it a better chance of controlling the volatile situation in Lebanon as events unfolded after the Israeli retreat in 1985, with Maronite opposition to Syrian policy and Hezbollah's gradual rise to prominence. Furthermore, Iran's war effort kept Iraq in check and neutralized Baghdad's potential to create problems for Syria in Lebanon or elsewhere. The Gulf War also gave a whole new dimension to Syrian foreign policy. It enabled Syria to mediate between Iran and the GCC states to contain the hostilities, thereby bolstering its power and influence and ability to acquire financial and material benefits from both sides in return. Finally, as Gorbachev signalled his disapproval of Assad's quest to achieve "strategic parity" with Israel, reduced arms supplies to Syria and began to diversify his relations in the Middle East by repairing relations with Israel and some of Syria's Arab rivals, the Syrian leader realized that he could no longer count on support from his Superpower patron and had to rely more on his own resources and capabilities, and that of his allies in the region, namely Iran and the Lebanese Shi'ites.

From revolutionary Iran's vantage point, perpetuation of the alliance with Syria was critical in several respects. In ideological terms, an alliance with one of the key players in the Arab world, which was at the same time the only true confrontation state against Israel and the cradle of modern Arab nationalism, enabled it to dismiss pro-Iraqi propaganda depicting Iran as an enemy of the Arab nation and portraying the Gulf War as an Arab-Persian conflict. In practical terms, Iran's continued ability to prevent Iraqi oil exports from the Gulf and interdict shipping bound for its foe, combined with Syria's refusal to reopen the IPC pipelines to the Mediterranean, served as a "Syrian-Iranian pincer" to maintain a partial economic stranglehold on Iraq. This neatly fed into Iran's strategy to drain and paralyze Iraq economically and gradually bring it to its knees through a war of attrition. Syria also served as an important gateway for Iran into Lebanon. It had been a facilitator of Iran's activities among the Shi'ite community that was of both political and ideological value to the clerical regime. Due to Syrian cooperation and acquiescence, Iran had been able to gain a large following among the Shi'ites and mobilize them to resist the Israelis and their Lebanese allies. Despite intermittent squabbling with Damascus over the future of Lebanon from 1985 onwards, Tehran was well aware that Assad was the final arbiter in Lebanon, and it would not serve Iran's long-term political interests to challenge him in his own backyard. In the final analysis, Syrian interests took precedence in Lebanon, just as Iran's did in the Gulf and, even if Iran was not able to replicate its theocratic model in Lebanon, a modest foothold there (right at the doorstep of the "Zionist entity") was better than none. Between 1985 and 1988, the two allies were able successfully to delineate the parameters of their cooperation, identify their vital interests and forge

understandings on how to perpetuate their partnership for many years to come.

#### ENDNOTES

1. BBC/SWB/ME/7905/A/6 March 21, 1985.
2. BBC/SWB/ME/7905/i March 21, 1985.
3. See *Al-Thawrah*, March 21, 1985.
4. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1984-85*, p. 120.
5. The aerial bombardment and missile attacks reached their peak between March 15-25, and continued intermittently until June 30.
6. BBC/SWB/ME/7911/A/3 March 28, 1985.
7. In an interview with *The Tehran Times* on March 27, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Mohammad Besharati set out Iran's conditions for the cessation of hostilities: 1) identification and punishment of the aggressor, 2) reparation payments of \$350 billion to Iran, and 3) The return of over 200,000 Iraqi expellees to their homeland.
8. As mentioned in the previous chapter, according to former President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, Ayatollah Khomeini was obsessed with creating a Shi'ite Islamic domain encompassing Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, with him as the supreme leader. This was the primary reason for his insistence on continuing the Gulf war. His personal animosity towards Saddam Hussein also contributed to his inflexible stance on the continuation of the hostilities. Conversation with Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, Versailles, France, December 1994. Also see Abolhassan Bani-Sadr's book, translated by William Ford, *My Turn to Speak* (Washington: Brassey's Inc., 1991), pp. 179, 183-184.
9. Paradoxically, Iran's growing activism in Lebanon in the aftermath of the Israeli withdrawal from most occupied areas, its backing of the militant Hezbollah movement, which was rapidly gaining ground among the Shi'ite population, and its advocacy of the creation of an Islamic state put it at odds with its primary Arab ally.
10. BBC/SWB/ME/7943/A/5 May 6, 1985.
11. Between 1984 and 1986, the Syrians arranged a series of secret negotiations between senior Saudi and Iranian officials to reconcile their differences and thaw bilateral relations. See Claude van England's article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, Weekly International Edition, September 14/20, 1987.
12. See Gary Sick, "Iran's Quest for Superpower Status," *Foreign Affairs*, 65, No. 5, Spring 1987, p. 703, BBC/SWB/ME/7956/i and A/2-5, May 21, 1985, and BBC/SWB/ME/7957/A/1-3 May 22, 1985.
13. For more details, see R.K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 188-194, and *The International Herald Tribune*, July 3, 1985.
14. See *The International Herald Tribune*, July 3, 1985.
15. *The Daily Telegraph*, July 5, 1985.
16. See BBC/SWB/ME/8014/A/2-3 July 27, 1985.

17. BBC/SWB/ME/8007/i July 19, 1985.
18. BBC/SWB/ME/8008/A/5 July 20, 1985.
19. *Le Monde*, July 30, 1985.
20. *The International Herald Tribune*, July 29, 1985.
21. *The Financial Times*, July 29, 1985, and *The Guardian*, July 30, 1985.
22. *The International Herald Tribune*, July 29, 1985.
23. While addressing members of the Syrian armed forces on the 40th anniversary of its foundation, Hafez Assad declared that Syria must achieve "strategic parity" with Israel and characterized those Arab leaders who were willing to negotiate with Israel as "traitors." He added: "we see around us Arab regimes falling down the road of surrender... consequently, we in Syria have no alternative but to double our efforts to prevent the total collapse of the Arab nation - which is what Israel is planning." See *The Times*, August 2, 1985.
24. *The International Herald Tribune*, August 12, 1985. The communiqué also reiterated the Arab League's condemnation of Iran for prolonging the Gulf conflict and stated that the member states would reconsider their relations with Tehran if it did not accept a negotiated settlement.
25. See BBC/SWB/ME/8027/A/1-3 August 12, 1985, and *The International Herald Tribune*, August 10/11, 1985.
26. BBC/SWB/ME/8028/A/3 August 13, 1985.
27. BBC/SWB/ME/8039/i August 26, 1985.
28. BBC/SWB/ME/8040/A/1 August 27, 1985.
29. BBC/SWB/ME/8040/A/2 August 27, 1985.
30. *The International Herald Tribune*, January 22, 1987.
31. *The Times*, June 18, 1985.
32. Dilip Hiro, *Lebanon: Fire and Embers* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 115. Only 48 hours after the Israeli army left Sidon, between 10 and 12 thousand pro-Iranian fundamentalists poured into the city to participate in a massive demonstration, denouncing Amin Gemayel and the Israelis and demanding the establishment of an Islamic republic. The demonstrators, primarily Shi'ites from Beirut's poor Muslim suburbs, displayed placards with pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini and Lebanese religious leaders. See *The Financial Times*, February 19, 1985.
33. *Middle East International*, March 22, 1985. During three incidents in February and March 1985 alone, 23 Israeli soldiers were killed or wounded by Shi'ite guerillas.
34. BBC/SWB/ME/7914/i April 1, 1985.
35. BBC/SWB/ME/7918/i April 5, 1985.
36. *The Financial Times*, and *The Times*, April 26, 1985.

37. Hiro, p. 115.

38. For details on Iranian support and funding of Hezbollah during this period, see Thomas Friedman's article in *The New York Times*, June 25, 1985, Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran*, pp. 186-187, and Yosef Olmert, "Iranian-Syrian Relations: Between Islam and Realpolitik," in *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, ed. David Menashri (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990), p. 183.

39. Some Hezbollah leaders explicitly stated that their primary intention was to transform Lebanon into a theocratic state. In an interview with Agence France Presse, Hezbollah leader Abbas Musawi stated that his party's aim was to create an Iranian-style Islamic republic in Lebanon. See *The International Herald Tribune*, July 11, 1985.

40. *The International Herald Tribune*, July 3, 1985.

41. BBC/SWB/ME/7943/A/6 May 6, 1985. Upon his return to Tehran, in an interview, Kamubi asserted: "Despite conspiracies of the Zionists' agents to create division between Shi'ite and Sunni brothers, the unity of the Shi'ite and Sunni ulema and solidarity of the followers of the two sects are strong and foil conspiracies of the enemies of Islam." See BBC/SWB/ME/7946/A/10 May 9, 1985.

42. *The Financial Times*, May 21, 1985. Other estimates put the number of Palestinian fighters in Lebanon by then as high as 14,000, but this figure seems suspect. See Hiro, p. 117.

43. *The Financial Times*, May 31, 1985.

44. *The International Herald Tribune*, June 6, 1985.

45. *Middle East International*, June 14, 1985.

46. BBC/SWB/ME/7958/i May 23, 1985.

47. BBC/SWB/ME/7964/i May 30, 1985.

48. *Middle East International*, June 14, 1985, and BBC/SWB/ME/7972/i June 8, 1985.

49. *Middle East International*, June 14, 1985.

50. Ibid.

51. BBC/SWB/ME/7967/i June 3, 1985.

52. BBC/SWB/ME/7970/A/1 June 6, 1985. This was one of the earliest indications that some members of the Iranian leadership recognized that they could not overstep certain bounds in Lebanon, and would have to defer to Syria.

53. *Middle East International*, June 14, 1985.

54. See *Middle East International*, June 14, 1985, and BBC/SWB/ME/7964/i May 30, 1985.

55. For an excellent analysis of the situation, see Thomas Friedman's article in *The International Herald Tribune*, June 27, 1985.

56. See Charles Winslow, *Lebanon: War and Politics in a Fragmented Society* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 250, and Hiro, pp. 117-118.



57. *The International Herald Tribune*, June 24, 1985.
58. Ibid.
59. In a disparaging statement, Ayatollah Montazeri referred to Berri's followers as "renegades." See *Le Monde*, June 25, 1985.
60. See *Le Monde*, June 25 and 26, 1985.
61. See Jim Mui's article in *Middle East International*, July 12, 1985, pp. 3-4.
62. *The International Herald Tribune*, June 13, 1985.
63. See *The International Herald Tribune*, June 20, 1985, and *The Times*, July 5, 1985.
64. *Middle East International*, June 28, 1985, and *The International Herald Tribune*, June 25, 1985.
65. *Middle East International*, July 12, 1985.
66. Amal lost over 500 fighters in clashes with the Palestinians. Hiro, p. 118.
67. For more details, see *The International Herald Tribune*, June 24, 1985, *The Times*, July 5, 1985, and *Le Monde*, September 7, 1985.
68. Hiro, p. 119.
69. BBC/SWB/ME/8026/i August 13, 1985.
70. *Middle East International*, August 23, 1985. Abu Musa posited: "It is the first time that a non-Arab Muslim nation has received us with so much warmth and enthusiasm."
71. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 24, 1985, and *The Times*, August 26, 1985.
72. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 6, 1985.
73. *Middle East International*, October 11, 1985.
74. Ibid.
75. See BBC/SWB/ME/8066/i September 26, 1985, and *Le Monde*, September 27, 1985.
76. BBC/SWB/ME/8066/i September 26, 1985.
77. In fact many Christians and secular Sunnis felt oppressed under Tawheed's rule, and had opted to leave the city.
78. *Middle East International*, October 11, 1985.
79. BBC/SWB/ME/8071/A/1 October 2, 1985.
80. *Middle East International*, November 8, 1985.
81. BBC/SWB/ME/8071/A/1-2 October 2, 1985.

82. See Jim Muir's excellent analysis in *Middle East International*, October 11, 1985, p. 11.
83. *The Financial Times*, October 7, 1985.
84. *Middle East International*, October 11, 1985.
85. *The Times*, November 6, 1985. Two months following the end of the confrontation between Tawheed and Syria, Sheikh Shaban visited Iran to discuss the situation in Lebanon with Iranian leaders and coordinate their policies. See BBC/SWB/ME/8132/i December 12, 1985. Shaban had a series of high-level meetings with Revolutionary Guards Minister Rafiqdoust, Majles Speaker Rafsanjani, President of the Supreme Judicial Council Musavi-Ardabili and Grand Ayatollah Montazeri. He told Montazeri: "Today Islamic Iran has turned into the only source of hope for the deprived of the world and for the struggling nations and also for Islamic movements." Ayatollah Montazeri responded by declaring: "We have always supported Islamic movements and shall continue to do so, and in the case of Lebanon, since the categorical majority of its people are Muslims, it is necessary that through strengthening the Islamic movement in that country, Islamic rule shall soon be established in Lebanon...It is the duty of all Muslim strata and groups [in Lebanon] whether Shi'ite or Sunni, to put aside minor religious and sectarian differences and not to permit Israel and its undercover lackeys to take advantage of these differences for purposes of weakening Islam and Muslims." BBC/SWB/ME/8136/A/3-4 December 17, 1985.
86. *Middle East International*, November 8, 1985.
87. Ibid. Another editorial elucidated that Damascus' actions "to preserve the balance of forces in Lebanon in favor of pro-Israeli tendencies and the moderate leaders of the Amal movement [were in harmony with] the policy of Moscow and Washington to control the wave of militant Islam and to minimize the threat to Israel."
88. BBC/SWB/ME/8088/i October 22, 1985.
89. BBC/SWB/ME/8088/A/6 October 22, 1985.
90. On September 4-5, armed clashes occurred between Amal and the PSP. *Le Monde*, September 7, 1985.
91. *The Times*, November 6, 1985.
92. Hiro, p. 119.
93. Hiro, p. 119, and *The Times*, November 6, 1985.
94. *The Guardian*, December 21, 1985.
95. Hiro, p. 119.
96. Ibid.
97. Hiro, pp. 119-121, and *The Guardian*, December 21, 1985.
98. For more details, see Anthony H. Cordesman and Abraham R. Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 209-213.
99. See *Le Monde*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, September 26, 1985.

100. *The International Herald Tribune*, September 26, 1985, and *The Guardian*, September 28, 1985.
101. The annual budget stood at approximately £30 billion. See *The Guardian*, September 28, 1985.
102. Edgar O'Ballance, *The Gulf War* (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1988), p. 171, and *The Guardian*, September 28, 1985.
103. By mid-November, the Iraqi air force had conducted 37 raids against Kharg Island, and by the time the year drew to a close, Kharg had been attacked almost 60 times. O'Ballance, p. 171, and Cordesman & Wagner, p. 212.
104. Cordesman and Wagner, p. 211-212.
105. See *Le Monde*, October 31, and November 3/4 1985.
106. It is noteworthy that both Iraq and Saudi Arabia were willing to risk escalating tensions in the area since they were not as dependent as Iran on exporting their oil through the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia was able to export its oil from the Red Sea port of Yanbu, while Iraq exported 1 million b/d via the pipeline to the Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean and, as of September 1985, another 500,000 b/d again by pipeline through the Saudi port of Yanbu on the Red Sea. See Cordesman and Wagner, pp. 212-213, and Frederick W. Axelgard, "War and Oil: Implications for Iraq's Postwar Role in Gulf Security," in *Iraq in Transition: A Political, Economic, and Strategic Perspective*, ed. Frederick W. Axelgard (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1986), pp. 8-11.
107. BBC/SWB/ME/8055/i September 13, 1985, and BBC/SWB/ME/8056/i September 14, 1985. The other members of the committee included Arab League Secretary-General Chedli Klibi and Tunisian Prime Minister Mohammed Mzali.
108. BBC/SWB/ME/8057/A/6 September 16, 1985.
109. BBC/SWB/ME/8059/i September 18, 1985.
110. BBC/SWB/ME/8060/i September 19, 1985.
111. BBC/SWB/ME/8060/A/4 September 19, 1985.
112. Musavi stated that Syria was at the forefront of the struggle against Israel and, by bolstering their relations, Iran and Syria now played a prominent role in Middle Eastern politics and were a force to be reckoned with in international politics. BBC/SWB/ME/8060/A/4 September 19, 1985.
113. BBC/SWB/ME/8060/A/5 September 19, 1985, and *The Financial Times*, September 23, 1985. An editorial that appeared in the Iranian daily *Jomhuri Eslami* on September 19, reflecting the official Iranian position on the Syrian-Jordanian talks, advocated a firm Syrian stand on the Palestinian issue as long as the "cancerous Zionist growth" had not been removed from the region, adding that the bilateral dialogue with Amman should be a means to "tear Jordan away from the bosom of Zionism."
114. BBC/SWB/ME/8060/i September 19, 1985.
115. See *The Financial Times*, September 21, 1985.
116. BBC/SWB/ME/8089/A/2-3 October 23, 1985.
117. *Middle East International*, November 8, 1985.

118. BBC/SWB/ME/8089/A/2-3 October 23, 1985.
119. On October 24, an editorial in the Persian-language daily, *Ettela'at*, warned about the implications of a Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement, calling it a "dangerous" development that could possibly lead to Syria's loss of its "anti-Zionist ally," Iran.
120. See *Le Monde*, October 27/28, 1985, and BBC/SWB/ME/8094/A/3 October 29, 1985.
121. BBC/SWB/ME/8094/A/3 October 29, 1985.
122. BBC/SWB/ME/8079/i November 1, 1985.
123. See *Le Monde*, November 3/4 1985, *The Guardian*, November 5, 1985, and *The International Herald Tribune*, November 6, 1985.
124. *The Daily Telegraph*, November 7, 1985.
125. *The Daily Telegraph*, November 7, 1985, and *Le Monde*, November 8, 1985.
126. See also *Middle East International*, November 22, 1985.
127. In addition, UAE President Sheikh Zayid bin Sultan al-Nuhayan was attempting to bridge the differences between Libya, Iran's other Arab ally, and Iraq. See *Middle East International*, November 22, 1985.
128. BBC/SWB/ME/8107/i November 13, 1985.
129. For more details, see BBC/SWB/ME/8109/A/3 November 15, 1985.
130. BBC/SWB/ME/8128/i November 19, 1985.
131. BBC/SWB/ME/8123/i December 2, 1985, and *Le Monde*, December 3, 1985.
132. BBC/SWB/ME/8124/A/3 December 3, 1985. Velayati and al-Shara met again the next day, December 4, to discuss bilateral cooperation. See BBC/SWB/ME/8125/A/3 December 4, 1985.
133. BBC/SWB/ME/8126/A/2 December 5, 1985.
134. *Middle East International*, December 20, 1985. *The Financial Times* on December 5, 1985, stated that Iran was believed to have acceded to Syria's request to resume oil deliveries, but this runs contrary to the available evidence.
135. See also *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 5, 1985. In the immediate aftermath of the Muscat summit, the GCC had nominated Omani Foreign Minister Yusef al-Alawi to lead a delegation to Baghdad and Tehran in a new bid to bring the hostilities to an end. The GCC team visited Baghdad and held talks with Saddam Hussein; however, to their disappointment, Iran refused to receive them.
136. *Middle East International*, December 20, 1985.
137. BBC/SWB/ME/8131/A/3 December 11, 1985.
138. BBC/SWB/ME/8132/i December 12, 1985, and *Middle East International*, December 20, 1985.

139. BBC/SWB/ME/8132/i December 12, 1985.
140. See *The Financial Times*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, December 12, 1985.
141. BBC/SWB/ME/8133/i December 13, 1985.
142. *Middle East International*, December 20, 1985, and BBC/ME/8132/i December 12, 1985. The cessation of Iranian oil deliveries had also prompted Libya to send Syria some oil shipments.
143. *Al-Ittihad*, December 23, 1985, and BBC/SWB/ME/8142/i December 24, 1985.
144. See *Middle East International*, December 20, 1985, and *The Times*, December 27, 1985.
145. BBC/SWB/ME/8142/A/2-3 December 24, 1985.
146. BBC/SWB/ME/8142/A/4 December 24, 1985.
147. *The Times*, December 18, 1985.
148. *Le Monde*, December 28, 1985. Also see *The International Herald Tribune*, December 31 - January 1, 1985/86. In his November speech, King Hussein explained that a "minority group had deliberately undertaken destructive activities in Syria in the guise of religion."
149. *The Times*, December 18, 1985, and *Le Monde*, December 28, 1985.
150. Ibid.
151. *The International Herald Tribune*, December 31 - January 1, 1985/86.
152. BBC/SWB/ME/8146/i January 2, 1986.
153. *Middle East International*, January 10, 1986. In the days leading up to King Hussein's visit, the Iranian news media depicted the forthcoming meeting as a successful outcome of Assad's attempts to persuade the Jordanians to modify their stance on the Arab-Israeli problem and a victory for the radical states in the region. In parallel, the Majles rejected a bill submitted by the government for renewal of the oil agreement with Syria. The previous arrangement had stipulated annual deliveries of 6 million tons to Syria, 1 million at no cost and 5 million at discounted prices - with the Syrians actually selling the surplus on the international market for a \$200 million net profit.
154. See Sepehr Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 188, O'Ballance, pp. 151, 166, and Gary Sick, "How Iran is Becoming the Gulf's Superpower." in *The Washington Post*, May 18, 1986.
155. Cordesman and Wagner, pp. 219-220.
156. For more details, see Cordesman & Wagner, pp. 220-221, O'Ballance, pp. 173-175, and *Middle East International*, February 21, 1986.
157. Cordesman & Wagner, pp. 220, 223-224, and O'Ballance, pp. 176-179.
158. See also Zabih, pp. 188-200, and Cordesman & Wagner, pp. 223-225.
159. BBC/SWB/ME/8186/i February 18, 1986.

160. See *The International Herald Tribune*, February 17, 1986, *The Financial Times*, February 24, 1986, and *Middle East International*, February 21, 1986, pp. 3-4.
161. For details, see BBC/SWB/ME/8186/i February 18, 1986.
162. *The Financial Times*, February 24, 1986.
163. BBC/SWB/ME/8191/i February 24, 1986.
164. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1986*, pp. 106-107.
165. In an interview with the Kuwaiti daily, *Al-Siyasah*, published on March 1, King Hussein characterized Iran's recent military moves "as an aggression against the whole Arab nation" and went on to describe the hostilities as "an Arab-Iranian war." He expressed dismay at Arab support for Iran in some corners, lamenting: "it is very painful not to see the Arab nation place its entire potential at the disposal of Iraq." For examples of inflammatory statements made by members of the Iranian leadership, such as Khamene'i and Rafsanjani, vowing revenge against Iraq's Gulf Arab supporters, see BBC/SWB/ME/8186/i February 18, 1986, *Middle East International*, February 21, 1986, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1986*, p. 352.
166. Ayatollah Montazeri lashed out at those who had orchestrated this "oil conspiracy," arguing: "They sell oil which belongs to the Muslims and the oppressed, God-given wealth at bargain prices. They pour it into the pockets of the Superpowers at cheap prices in order to defeat revolutionary Iran." See Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), p. 173, and BBC/SWB/ME/A/2 March 12, 1986.
167. BBC/SWB/ME/8214/i March 22, 1986.
168. See BBC/SWB/ME/8216/A/9-10 March 25, 1986.
169. Chubin & Tripp, p. 145, and BBC/SWB/ME/A/4 March 28, 1986.
170. Chubin & Tripp, p. 149, and BBC/SWB/ME/A/7 March 31, 1986.
171. The Iranian media tried to play up events demonstrating Arab-Iranian solidarity as a means to minimize awareness about the growing Arab-Iranian rift. For example, on April 22, the Iranian news media reported that Iraqi refugees in Syria were flocking to five registration centers that had been recently opened by the Iraqi opposition to sign up as volunteers for combat against the Iraqi army in the Gulf War.
172. Hiro, p. 121.
173. *The Middle East*, March 1986.
174. In total, the intra-Marionite fighting resulted in 800-1,000 casualties. Hiro, p. 121.
175. *Middle East International*, January 24, 1986.
176. In the words of one observer, "the speed, ferocity and effectiveness of Maronite repudiation of the accord clearly caught the Syrians by surprise." See *The Middle East*, March 1986, p. 41.
177. Edgar O'Ballance, *Civil War in Lebanon 1975-92*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1995), p. 166.

178. Winslow, pp. 258-260.
179. See BBC/SWB/ME/8180/i February 11, 1986, and *The International Herald Tribune*, March 14, 1985.
180. *The Christian Science Monitor*, Weekly International Edition, March 29 - April 4, 1986.
181. See Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 480-482, *The Middle East*, June 1986, pp. 9-10, and Charles Glass, *Money for Old Rope: Disorderly Compositions* (London: Picador, 1992), pp. 313-319.
182. Seale, *Asad of Syria*, p. 474.
183. *The Daily Telegraph*, May 16, 1986.
184. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 15, 1986.
185. BBC/SWB/ME/8251/A/4 May 6, 1986. At the conclusion of the Tokyo summit on May 5, a joint communique was issued condemning "state-sponsored terrorism." See also Seale, p. 477.
186. See *Le Monde*, May 3 and 4/5, 1986.
187. BBC/SWB/ME/8251/A/5 May 6, 1986.
188. Also see *Le Monde*, May 17 and 18/19, 1986.
189. Al-Shara defended these actions, stating that Syria was seeking neither military superiority nor a conflict with Israel, but was determined to achieve parity with the Jewish state. *The Guardian*, May 26, 1986.
190. *Le Monde*, May 30, 1986.
191. *The International Herald Tribune*, June 9, 1986.
192. *The International Herald Tribune*, June 10, 1986.
193. *The International Herald Tribune*, June 12, 1986, and *Le Monde*, June 14, 1986.
194. *The International Herald Tribune*, June 13, 1986. The other Lebanese leaders included Sheikh Hassan Khaled, Sheikh Mohammed Shamseddin and a number of Sunni politicians. See *Le Monde*, June 14, 1986.
195. *Le Monde*, June 15, 1986.
196. *The International Herald Tribune*, June 17, 1986. During the same period, clashes occurred in the Bekaa once more, this time pitting Hezbollah fighters against those of the pro-Syrian SSNP in the town of Mashghara. The fighting raged on for four days, until Syrian troops intervened and restored order. For more details, see *Le Monde*, June 14 and 17, 1986, and *The International Herald Tribune*, June 15 and 17, 1986.
197. *The Guardian*, July 11, 1986.
198. *The Daily Telegraph*, July 22, 1986.

199. *The International Herald Tribune*, August 5, 1986.
200. *Le Monde*, August 6, 1986.
201. For a detailed analysis, see Claude van England's article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, Weekly International Edition, May 3/9, 1986.
202. *Middle East International*, May 16, 1986.
203. *Ibid.*, and BBC/SWB/ME/8252/A/3 May 7, 1986.
204. *Middle East International*, May 16, 1986.
205. See *Al-Siyasah* and *Al-Mustaqbal*, May 17, 1986, and BBC/SWB/ME/8262/i and A/4 May 19, 1986.
206. *Middle East International*, May 16, 1986.
207. For examples, see BBC/SWB/ME/8254/A/5-6 May 9, 1986, and BBC/SWB/ME/8256/A/2-3 May 12, 1986.
208. BBC/SWB/ME/8256/i May 12, 1986 and BBC/SWB/ME/8257/A/2 May 13, 1986.
209. BBC/SWB/ME/8256/i May 12, 1986 and BBC/SWB/ME/8258/i May 14, 1986.
210. BBC/SWB/ME/8258/i May 14, 1986.
211. See the extremely thorough analysis of the situation by Judith Perera in *The Middle East*, June 1986, pp. 9-10.
212. *Middle East International*, May 30, 1986.
213. For Jordanian motives to mend fences with Syria, see Judith Perera's article in *The Middle East*, July 1986, pp. 7-8.
214. *Le Monde*, May, 25/26, 1986.
215. *The Financial Times*, June 2, 1986.
216. *The Times*, May 26, 1986, and *Le Monde*, May 27, 1986.
217. BBC/SWB/ME/8268/i May 26, 1986, and *Le Monde*, May 27, 1986.
218. *Ibid.*
219. See *The Financial Times*, May 27, 1986, *Le Monde*, May 28, 1986, and BBC/SWB/ME/8207/i May 28, 1986.
220. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 28, 1986.
221. *Le Monde*, and *The Financial Times*, May 29, 1986.
222. *Middle East International*, June 13, 1986, and BBC/SWB/ME/8272/i May 30, 1986.



223. BBC/SWB/ME/8272/i May 30, 1986.
224. *The Guardian*, June 3, 1986.
225. See *The International Herald Tribune*, May 30, 1986, and *Le Monde*, May 31, 1986.
226. *Le Monde*, June 3, 1986.
227. *Le Monde*, June 4, 1986.
228. *The International Herald Tribune*, June 7/8, 1986, and *Le Monde*, June 12, 1986.
229. *The International Herald Tribune*, June 12, 1986.
230. *The Guardian*, June 3, 1986.
231. For details See Cordesman & Wagner, pp. 227, and O'Ballance, *The Gulf War*, pp. 179-180.
232. BBC/SWB/ME/8267/A/6 May 24, 1986.
233. For an accurate assessment of Syria's position at this time, see Shireen Hunter's analysis, "Pressure Grows on Syria to Make Up with Iraq," in *The International Herald Tribune*, June 7/8, 1986. Syria was caught between a rock and a hard place, since the Syrian-Libyan side of the Tehran-Damascus-Tripoli triad was also in trouble during this period. Libya was extremely displeased and vocal in its criticism about Syria's handling of the "War of the Camps" in Beirut and the opening towards Jordan. See *The International Herald Tribune*, June 14/15, 1985. In the absence of Iranian oil deliveries, Syria was forced to purchase oil on the spot market and from Libya. Algeria had also stepped in and promised to provide about 130,000 barrels per day to Syria on favorable terms. See *Le Monde*, June 5, 1986.
234. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 14, 1986. Quote taken from an interview with Assad by the Lebanese *Al-Shiraa* weekly magazine.
235. BBC/SWB/ME/8280/A/4 June 9, 1986.
236. Ibid., BBC/SWB/ME/8285/A/2 June 14, 1986, and *Middle East International*, June 27, 1986.
237. BBC/SWB/ME/8280/A/4 June 9, 1986, and *Middle East International*, June 27, 1986.
238. *Le Monde*, June 15/16, 1986 and *The International Herald Tribune*, June 19, 1985.
239. *Middle East International*, June 27, 1986, and *The Financial Times*, June 16, 1986.
240. See John K. Cooley's account in *The International Herald Tribune*, June 18, 1986, *Al-Ittihad* of Abu Dhabi, June 16, 1986, and *The Times*, June 24, 1986.
241. *The International Herald Tribune*, June 19, 1986.
242. Kuwait's *Al-Siyasah* carried a report to this effect on June 16. See also *The Financial Times*, June 16, 1986, and *The Guardian*, June 24, 1986.
243. For a number of different interpretations of Syrian motives, see *The International Herald Tribune*, June 19, 1986, *The Guardian*, June 24, 1986, and *Middle East International*, June 27, 1986.

244. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 19, 1986.
245. *The International Herald Tribune*, June 19, 1986.
246. For details on the impact of the release and improvements in Franco-Syrian and Franco-Iranian relations, see BBC/SWB/ME/8284/i June 13, 1986, *The Financial Times*, June 21, 1986, *The International Herald Tribune*, June 21/22, 1986, and Magnus Ranstorp, *Hizb'allah in Lebanon: The Politics of the Western Hostage Crisis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), p. 162.
247. *The Guardian*, June 24, 1986. In the weeks that followed, relations between Jordan and Syria were upgraded to the ambassadorial level for the first time since 1981. See BBC/SWB/ME/8291/A/8-9 June 21, 1986.
248. *Middle East International*, June 27, 1986. Aziz revealed that, as early as March 1986, at the behest of the Soviet Union, a secret meeting of Iraqi and Syrian intelligence officials had taken place, but the negotiations broke down.
249. See text of Tareq Aziz's interview in *Al-Siyasah*, June 28, 1986, and BBC/SWB/ME/8298/A/2-3 June 30, 1986.
250. Also see *The Guardian*, June 25, 1986.
251. The French reportedly made a commitment not to enter into any new arms agreements with the Iraqis, and only to honor the existing ones. The level of Arab concern was such that, in June, the GCC's General-Secretary, Abdullah Bishara, was dispatched to Paris to seek clarification of recent French moves. Bishara was assured that, despite certain concessions to Iran, France would continue to provide support for the Iraqi war effort. See *Middle East International*, June 27, 1986.
252. *Middle East International*, July 11, 1986. For details, see Cordesman & Wagner, pp. 228, and O'Ballance, p. 180.
253. BBC/SWB/ME/8304/i July 7, 1986, *Le Monde*, and *The Guardian*, July 8, 1986. The delegation also included Oil Minister Ghazi al-Durubi and Industry Minister Ali al-Tarabulsi.
254. Al-Imadi also declared that "the economic talks should have a positive effect on bilateral ties and reduce the impact of the conspiracies hatched by the two countries' enemies." See *The Guardian*, July 8, 1986.
255. *Le Monde*, and BBC/SWB/ME/8308/i July 11, 1986.
256. BBC/SWB/ME/8309/i July 12, 1986.
257. BBC/SWB/ME/8314/i July 18, 1986.
258. For a comprehensive analysis of the economic problems facing Iran, Iraq, Syria and other concerned states, see David Hirst's article in *The Guardian*, July 17, 1986.
259. *Middle East International*, July 11, 1986.
260. BBC/SWB/ME/8323/i July 29, 1986.
261. *Middle East International*, August 8, 1986.

262. Ibid., and BBC/SWB/ME/8323/i July 29, 1986.

263. He also put forth a four-point peace plan stipulating the withdrawal of both sides to the internationally-recognized boundaries, exchange of prisoners of war, mutual recognition of the regimes and cooperation to ensure Gulf stability. See O'Ballance, *The Gulf War*, p. 185.

264. See also Cordesman and Wagner, p. 229.

265. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 26, 1986.

266. *The Middle East*, September 1986, p. 8. It should be noted that Iraqi warplanes attacking Iranian oil loading terminals and installations in the southern Gulf region were actually refuelled in the air by Saudi air force tankers. Confidential conversation with a US government consultant and military aviation specialist. Washington, D.C., August 1993.

267. *The Guardian*, August 23, 1986, *Le Monde*, August 29, 1986, Cordesman & Wagner, p. 230, and O'Ballance, p. 184.

268. BBC/SWB/ME/8343/A/12-13 August 21, 1986, and *The Guardian*, August 23, 1986. The purpose of al-Shara's visit, in part, was to confer with Iranian officials about the forthcoming Non-Aligned Movement summit in Zimbabwe, in order to harmonize the positions of Syria and Iran.

269. See *The Guardian*, August 23, 1986, *Le Monde*, August 24/25, 1986, and BBC/SWB/ME/8346/i August 25, 1986.

270. *The Guardian*, August 23, 1986.

271. Ibid.

272. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 26, 1986.

273. BBC/SWB/ME/8346/i August 25, 1986 and *Le Monde*, August 26, 1986. Again, within a matter of a few days, Khaddam was bringing another message from Hafez Assad for Ali Khamene'i. Also see *Le Monde*, August 29, 1986, for additional details about the escalation of the Iraqi bombing campaign, its economic consequences for Iran and Syrian diplomacy at this point.

274. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 26, 1986.

275. BBC/SWB/ME/8346/i August 25, 1986, *Le Monde*, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 26, 1986. Concurrently, Assad and Khaddam left for Tripoli to meet with Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi. On the same day, Ayatollah Khomeini made a speech reaffirming that Iran would fight until victory had been achieved and Saddam Hussein was toppled.

276. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, and BBC/SWB/ME/8347/i August 26, 1986.

277. Chubin and Tripp, pp. 136-137. Although Saudi Arabia reversed its previous position by cutting production to shore up oil prices subsequent to the August OPEC summit, because of intense pressure from other producers, including Iran, prices did not reach their previous levels for some four years. See Chubin and Tripp. p. 173.

278. O'Ballance, pp. 189-190.

279. *The Financial Times*, October 4, 1986.

280. Ibid.

281. *Middle East International*, September 12, 1986.

282. For more details on Saudi-Iranian relations at this juncture, see *Middle East International*, October 10, 1986, and Gary Sick, "Iran's Quest for Superpower Status," *Foreign Affairs*, 1987, p. 703.

283. *The Times*, October 10, 1986.

284. *The Times*, October 16, 1986.

285. BBC/SWB/ME/8389/i October 14, 1986 and BBC/SWB/ME/8392/A/2-3 October 17, 1986. According to IRNA, Assad praised Iran's military exploits against Iraq, reaffirmed Syrian support for Iran and called for the expansion of cooperative ties.

286. BBC/SWB/ME/8392/A/3 October 17, 1986. Also see Chubin and Tripp, p. 181.

287. *The Guardian*, October 29, 1986. Following on the heels of Rafiqdoust's visit to Syria, as tensions steadily grew in the Persian Gulf with many anticipating a major Iranian offensive, Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah arrived in Damascus to discuss Syrian support for Iran and the prospects for a Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation. His efforts seem to have been in vain, as no major policy shift occurred.

288. For an example, see the Iraqi daily, *Al-Thawrah*, November 12, 1986, on Israel's role in the Iran-Contra affair. At a ceremony marking the birth of the Prophet on November 13, Iraqi Vice-President Taha Muhyi al-Din Ma'ruf delivered a fiery speech denouncing the "fanaticism and rancor harbored by the Persians against the Arabs" and their attempts to "falsify and distort" Islam in order to implement "their evil political designs" under the garb of religion at the expense of "the Arab nation" and Iraq, which represented "the radiant center of a civilizing renaissance." He underscored that, to carry out "their racist and shu'ubi plot," they had cooperated with the "enemies of Arabs and Islam, particularly the Zionists" throughout history. In a thinly-veiled attack on Syria, Ma'ruf highlighted that Iran's collaboration with the Zionists "exposed and refuted the arguments of those who claim to be Arabs and who are cooperating with them, justifying such cooperation by citing the bragging by the rulers of Iran about liberating Jerusalem and regaining Palestine." BBC/SWB/ME/8417/A/2 November 15, 1986.

289. BBC/SWB/ME/8439/A/2 December 11, 1986.

290. In mid-December, Tehran was somewhat relieved, and at the same time some of its worst fears were confirmed, when veteran journalist Bob Woodward broke the story in *The Washington Post* on December 16 about the CIA providing Iraq with satellite intelligence since 1984. Despite initial denials, the Reagan administration subsequently confirmed the veracity of the report. Immediately after the revelations, on December 17, the Iranian foreign ministry issued a strongly-worded statement condemning US backing of Iraq and emphasizing that Iran was undeterred in its aim to eliminate "the tyrannical regime ruling over Iraq." BBC/SWB/ME/8446/A/2 December 19, 1986.

291. *Le Monde*, August 6, 1986, and *The Financial Times*, August 7, 1986.

292. Hiro, p. 123.

293. Winslow, p. 258.

294. See Robert Fisk's article in *The Times*, November 20, 1986. Also refer to *The Financial Times*, December 19, 1986, and Edgar O'Ballance, *Civil War in Lebanon*, p. 170.

295. Winslow, p. 260. Furthermore, in southern Lebanon, armed Palestinians made their way back to refugee camps on the outskirts of Tyre and Sidon, and virtually controlled the port city of Sidon itself. See also Robert Fisk's analysis in *The Times*, November 20, 1986.

296. Winslow, p. 258.

297. Hiro, p. 124, and O'Ballance, p. 171.

298. O'Ballance, p. 171, and *The International Herald Tribune*, November 29-30, 1986.

299. *Middle East International*, December 19, 1986.

300. See *The Christian Science Monitor*, Weekly International Edition, December 8/14, 1986, and *Middle East International*, December 19, 1986. Headed by Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, the team that travelled to southern Lebanon included Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Sheikholislam, Director-General of the Foreign Ministry Mahmoud Hashemi and Ayatollah Montazeri's Representative in Lebanon, Sheikh Mohammad Ismail. See BBC/SWB/ME/8420/A/9 November 19, 1986, BBC/SWB/ME/8422/i November 21, 1986, and *Le Monde*, November 23/24, 1986.

301. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 26, 1986, and *The Christian Science Monitor*, Weekly International Edition, December 8/14, 1986.

302. They met with Assad on November 29 and Velayati conveyed a message from Ali Khamene'i to the Syrian leader. See BBC/SWB/ME/8430/i December 1, 1986.

303. *The Guardian*, December 2, 1986.

304. *Le Monde*, December 7/8, 1986.

305. *The International Herald Tribune*, December 8, 1986.

306. *The International Herald Tribune*, December 9, 1986.

307. See *The Financial Times*, December 9 and 11, 1986. During a temporary ceasefire arranged by the Iranians, Hezbollah ambulances transported casualties out of Maghdousheh. *The Guardian*, December 12, 1986.

308. *The Guardian*, December 12, 1986.

309. *The International Herald Tribune*, December 13/14, 1986, and *The Guardian*, December 15, 1986. Estimates vary on the number of casualties throughout this period.

310. *The Guardian*, December 15, 1986, and *The International Herald Tribune*, December 16, 1986.

311. *The International Herald Tribune*, December 16, 17, and 18, 1986.

312. *The Daily Telegraph*, December 18, 1986.

313. See *Middle East International*, December 19, 1986.

314. *The Financial Times*, December 19, 1986. Both Shi'ite and Sunni Lebanese Islamists used the opportunity to criticize and discredit the secular agenda of Syria and Amal. A case in point was Sheikh Fadlallah's assertion that Islamic interests and unity took precedence over Arab nationalism. See

Olmert, p. 183.

315. See *The Guardian*, December 30, 1986. Ali Khamene'i had called for an end to the bloodshed in the closing days of December, while Iranian envoy Issa Tabatabai had remained in Rashidiyyah for three weeks, vowing not to leave until a satisfactory solution had been formulated.

316. According to Zabih, following the defeat in Operation Kheiber in March 1985, due to an initiative taken by President Khamene'i, a selected group of senior military personnel were brought out of retirement to participate in formulating a plan for a final offensive against Iraq. See. p. 196.

317. In November 1987, Iran achieved a significant breakthrough when it convinced the two main Iraqi Kurdish opposition groups, the KDP and PUK, to put aside their rivalry and join forces with Tehran in the war against the Baghdad regime. Reportedly, this move also received the blessing of Syria. See *The Guardian*, November 19, 1986, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 29, 1986.

318. BBC/SWB/ME/8440/i December 12, 1986.

319. BBC/SWB/ME/8459/i January 7, 1987. Besharati also conveyed a message from Khamene'i to Assad dealing with the relevant issues.

320. Cordesman and Wagner, pp. 248-249.

321. According to some sources, Iranian and Iraqi losses may have been as high as 62,000 and 21,000 respectively. See O'Ballance, *The Gulf War*, p. 196, and Cordesman & Wagner, p. 253.

322. One military analyst decried Karbala 5 as Iran's "Verdun." Conversation with IISS Research Associate Dr. Ahmed Hashim, London, August 1994.

323. *The Guardian*, February 27, 1987 and *The International Herald Tribune*, February 28-March 1, 1987.

324. See the excellent analysis by Bernard Trainor in *The International Herald Tribune*, July 20, 1988.

325. See *Middle East International*, February 6, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8481/A/1-3 February 2, 1987.

326. For further details or the English translation see BBC/SWB/ME/8476/A/1-8 January 27, 1987.

327. Throughout the winter of 1986-87, Syria continued to be a conduit for the procurement and transshipment of weapons on the international arms market for Iran's war effort, including munitions and shoulder-held anti-aircraft missiles from the Swedish arms manufacturer, Bofors. The latter were used by the Iranians during Karbala 5 to devastating effect, bringing down some 50-60 Iraqi aircraft - 10% of the Iraqi air force. See *The Guardian*, February 12, 1987, BBC/SWB/ME/8496/A/9 February 19, 1987, *The Washington Post*, March 10, 1987, and Joe Stork, "Reagan Re-flags the Gulf," *MERIP Reports*, September/October 1987, p. 4.

328. *Al-Thawrah* (Baghdad), January 27, 1987, *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 30, 1987, and *Middle East International*, February 6, 1987.

329. See BBC/SWB/ME/8478/i January 29, 1987.

330. See Mary Curtius' analysis of the outcome of the Islamic summit in *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 30, 1987.

331. Cordesman and Wagner, p. 255. Tehran's attacks on Gulf shipping were a riposte to an intensive Iraqi aerial campaign during Karbala 5 targeting Iranian cities and vessels. During January and February, Iraq conducted over 250 air and missile attacks against various targets - mainly urban centers - throughout Iran, resulting in 4-6 thousand deaths and 10-12 thousand injuries. Also see *Middle East International*, February 6, 1987.
332. See Claude van England's article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, Weekly International Edition, March 16/22, 1987.
333. Hiro, p. 126, and O'Ballance, *Civil War in Lebanon*, p.172.
334. *The International Herald Tribune*, February 13, 1987, and *The Financial Times*, February 14, 1987.
335. *The Financial Times*, February 14, 1987, and *The International Herald Tribune*, February 14/15, 1987.
336. O'Ballance, p. 172-173. The delivery and distribution of food was overseen by the political advisor of the Iranian embassy, Mohammad Hassan Sattari. Ambulances were allowed to take away wounded, and sick women and children. See *The International Herald Tribune*, February 16, 1987.
337. *The International Herald Tribune*, February 16, 1987, and O'Ballance, p. 173.
338. Hiro, p. 126.
339. Hiro, pp. 126-127, and O'Ballance, p. 173.
340. *The Financial Times*, February 23, 1987, and O'Ballance, p. 173.
341. *The International Herald Tribune*, February 18, 1987.
342. Hiro, p. 127.
343. O'Ballance, p. 174, *The Financial Times*, February 23, 1987, and *The Guardian*, February 24, 1987.
344. O'Ballance, p. 175.
345. See the superb analyses in *The Financial Times* by Nora Boustany on February 23, and Richard Johns on February 24.
346. For more details see *The Financial Times*, February 23, 1987, and *The Guardian*, February 24, 1987.
347. O'Ballance, p. 174, and *The International Herald Tribune*, February 27, 1987.
348. See O'Ballance, p. 174, and *Le Monde*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, February 25, 1987.
349. See BBC/SWB/ME/8359/i September 9, 1986 and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1986*, p. 485 for details on the Amal-Hezbollah clashes. The fighting ended after the intercession of Iranian embassy personnel and members of the Amal-Hezbollah joint committee, which had been formed earlier under Iranian auspices. For details on Syrian-Hezbollah tensions see *The International Herald Tribune*, October 29, 1986, *Le Monde*, October 30, 1986, *The Christian Science Monitor*, Weekly International Edition, November 17/23, 1986, *The International Herald Tribune*, October 30, 1986, *Le Monde*, October 31, 1986, *The Financial Times*, February 13, 1987, and *The International Herald Tribune*, February 14/15,

1987.

350. Ranstorp, p. 98.

351. *The Financial Times*, February 2, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8482/i February 3, 1987.

352. See Robert Fisk's fascinating piece in *The Times*, March 20, 1987.

353. See *Middle East International*, March 6, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8502/i February 26, 1987.

354. For details of some of the initial reports see *The International Herald Tribune*, and *The Financial Times*, February 25, 1987, and *Le Monde*, February 26, 1987.

355. See *The Daily Telegraph*, February 26, 1987, *The International Herald Tribune*, February 27, 1987, and *The Times*, March 3, 1987.

356. BBC/SWB/ME/8502/i February 26, 1987.

357. *The Daily Telegraph*, February 26, 1987, and *The International Herald Tribune*, February 27, 1987.

358. *The International Herald Tribune*, February 26, 1987, *Le Monde*, February 27, 1987, and *Middle East International*, March 6, 1987.

359. *The Financial Times*, February 26, 1987.

360. *Le Monde*, February 27, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8503/i February 27, 1987. Another Hezbollah official, Hassan Nasrallah, stated that Hezbollah was determined to maintain its foothold in Beirut and its southern environs and resist any attempts to dislodge it. *The Guardian*, March 5, 1987.

361. BBC/SWB/ME/8502/i February 26, 1987.

362. See Robert Fisk's article in *The Times*, February 25, 1987.

363. BBC/SWB/ME/8500/A/6 February 24, 1987.

364. BBC/SWB/ME/8501/i February 25, 1987 and *The Financial Times*, March 7, 1987.

365. *The Times*, March 3, 1987.

366. *Middle East International*, March 6, 1987, and *The International Herald Tribune*, March 7/8, 1987.

367. *The Financial Times*, February 27, 1987.

368. *The Guardian*, February 27, 1987.

369. *The International Herald Tribune*, February 28 - March 1, 1987.

370. See also *Le Monde*, February 27, 1987.

371. See BBC/SWB/ME/8505/A/3-4 March 2, 1987.

372. *Ibid.*



373. *Middle East International*, March 6, 1987. For Mohtashami's statements regarding the incident see also BBC/SWB/ME/8507/A/23 March 4, 1987.
374. *The Guardian*, February 27, 1987.
375. *The International Herald Tribune*, March 7/8, 1987.
376. *Middle East International*, March 20, 1987.
377. Ibid.
378. BBC/SWB/ME/8511/i March 9, 1987.
379. *Middle East International*, March 20, 1987.
380. See *The Financial Times*, March 7, 1987.
381. Ibid. On the same day, while addressing the participants at the Friday prayers sermon at Tehran University, President Khamene'i once again officially exonerated Assad and the Ba'thi leadership from the Basta killings, instead directing the blame at elements within the Syrian military. He also cautioned against possible efforts to disarm Hezbollah, arguing: "if these young, pious forces were to be deprived of their weapons, who would defend Lebanon and the Islamic forces against Israeli aggression?" Khamene'i stated that such a move would damage Syria's prestige, underscoring that, after all, Hezbollah had been responsible for dealing "the most blows against the forces of Zionism and arrogance." Furthermore, he reiterated previous demands for the punishment of the culprits. See *The Guardian*, March 7, 1987, *The International Herald Tribune*, March 9, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8511/i March 9, 1987. In response to Khamene'i's remarks, the next day, Damascus radio justified the Syrian military intervention, arguing that those who carried firearms in Beirut under the pretext of fighting the Israelis had killed Lebanese civilians instead. It went on to lambast "foreign powers" that were opposed to the Syrian security measures in West Beirut.
382. BBC/SWB/ME/8511/i March 9, 1987, and *Le Monde*, March 10, 1987.
383. BBC/SWB/ME/8512/i March 10, 1987.
384. See *Middle East International*, March 20, 1987, and *The International Herald Tribune*, March 11, 1987.
385. Ibid.
386. Ibid.
387. BBC/SWB/ME/8512/i March 10, 1987.
388. For the full text of the interview broadcast on Tehran radio, see BBC/SWB/ME/8513/A/4-6 March 11, 1987, and also *Jomhuri Eslami*, March 12, 1987.
389. *The International Herald Tribune*, March 11, 1987.
390. *The Guardian*, March 12, 1987.
391. BBC/SWB/ME/8516/i March 14, 1987.

392. See also *The Financial Times*, March 18, 1987.
393. See Robert Fisk's comprehensive overview in *The Times*, February 25, 1987, BBC/SWB/ME/8512/A/3 March 10, 1987, and O'Ballance, p. 175. Many Amal militiamen who defected to Hezbollah also felt betrayed by Syria's handling of the Basta affair.
394. See Efraim Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria: The Asad Years* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 86-87. By mid-1987, Syria was facing its worst financial crisis in 16 years. Its hard currency reserves had shrunk to \$20-40 million, and it had defaulted on \$60 million in payments to the World Bank, prompting the latter to stop disbursements. The Soviet Union and most GCC states had discontinued financial assistance. Only Saudi Arabia contributed about \$540 million annually. By now, it was unofficially estimated that domestic inflation was running at about 125%. See the articles by Nora Boustany in *The International Herald Tribune*, July 18/19, 1987, and *The Financial Times*, July 23, 1987.
395. *Le Monde*, March 10, 1987, and *The Financial Times*, March 18, 1987.
396. See *Le Monde*, April 17, 1987. It was even claimed that, as of January 1987, Iran had discontinued oil deliveries to Syria altogether to signal its displeasure with Syrian policies in Lebanon and the Gulf.
397. BBC/SWB/ME/8478/i January 29, 1987.
398. BBC/SWB/ME/8491/A/10-12 February 13, 1987.
399. Robert O. Freedman, *Moscow and the Middle East: Soviet Policy Since the Invasion of Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 207, 221.
400. Efraim Karsh, *Soviet Policy Towards Syria Since 1970* (London: Macmillan Ltd., 1991), p. 166.
401. Freedman, pp. 241, 247.
402. BBC/SWB/ME/8500/A/6 February 24, 1987.
403. See BBC/SWB/ME/8511/i March 9, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8512/i March 10, 1987.
404. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 123.
405. *The Guardian*, April 4, 1987, and *Le Monde*, April 5/6, 1987.
406. For more background details, see Karsh, *Soviet Policy Towards Syria 1970*, pp. 163-64.
407. *Ibid.*, pp. 166-167.
408. *Ibid.*, p. 169-170.
409. *Ibid.*, p.170.
410. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 25, 1987, *Le Monde*, April 28, 1987, and Karsh, *Soviet Policy Towards Syria Since 1970*, pp. 170-171.
411. See Freedman, pp, 263-265.
412. *Ibid.*, p. 264, and Karsh, *Soviet Policy Towards Syria Since 1970*, pp. 171-172. For more details on the Syrian-Soviet negotiations, also see *The International Herald Tribune*, September 26/27, 1987.

413. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 4, 1987.
414. For more details on the pressure brought to bear on Syria by Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Soviet Union, see *The International Herald Tribune*, May 4, 1987, *The Financial Times*, May 5, 1987, and *Le Monde*, May 6, 1987.
415. *Al-Qabas*, May 4, 1987, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 9, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8564/A/7 May 11, 1987.
416. *The Financial Times*, May 5, 1987, and *Le Monde*, May 6, 1987.
417. *Le Monde*, May 6, 1987, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 121.
418. See *The Guardian*, May 5, 1987, *Le Monde*, May 6, 1987, *Al-Qabas*, May 7, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/ 8564/A/8 May 11, 1987. Consequently, a scheduled meeting of Iraqi opposition organizations in Damascus was cancelled. *Le Monde*, May 6, 1987.
419. For more details, see *Le Monde*, May 6, 1987, *Al-Qabas*, May 7, 1987, BBC/SWB/ME/8564/A/8 May 11, 1987, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 121.
420. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 4, 1987, and *Le Monde*, May 6, 1987.
421. See *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 9, 1987. It was only two months later that Jordanian Prime Minister al-Rifai confirmed that King Hussein had hosted the secret meeting between the Syrian and Iraqi presidents. BBC/SWB/ME/8614/A/13 July 8, 1987, and *Middle East International*, July 11, 1987.
422. Hafez Assad publicly revealed that he had indeed met with his Iraqi rival during an interview with *The Washington Post* published on September 20, asserting that he had refused to comply with Saddam Hussein's demand to make a break with Iran. Also see *The Daily Telegraph*, September 21, 1987, *The Guardian* and *Le Monde*, September 22, 1987.
423. Al-Shara was subsequently quoted by the news media as stating: "Syria will never tread the path of compromise. Since the first day, Syria has welcomed the revolution as an anti-Zionist bastion...The most grave events in the region after the creation of the Zionist entity were the compromise by the Egyptian and Zionist regimes, and the launching of Saddam's war against the Islamic revolution of Iran, which has had the worst consequences." BBC/SWB/ME/8549/A/11 April 23, 1987.
424. *Le Monde*, April 28, 1987, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 123. During his stay in Tehran, al-Durubi also met Foreign Minister Velayati on April 30 to discuss issues of mutual concern and increased cooperation between the two sides. See BBC/SWB/ME/8557/i May 2, 1987.
425. *Le Monde*, May 13, 1987.
426. BBC/SWB/ME/8566/i May 13, 1987.
427. See BBC/SWB/ME/8567/i May 14, 1987.
428. BBC/SWB/ME/8567/i and A/5-6 May 14, 1987. Al-Shara reiterated Syria's solidarity with Iran and later described the outcome of his visit as "successful and positive." See BBC/SWB/ME/8566/i May 13, 1987, and *Le Monde*, May 14, 1987.
429. Already in March, Tunisia severed diplomatic relations with Iran, accusing its diplomats of "flagrant

violations of diplomatic norms" through the recruitment of religious extremists to create "chaos and ideological sedition." BBC/SWB/ME/8527/i March 27, 1987. Several weeks later, on May 13, Egypt announced its decision to close down the Iranian interests section in Cairo, denouncing the conduct of its staff as unacceptable and giving them seven days to leave the country. See BBC/SWB/ME/8567/i May 14, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8571/A/11-12 May 19, 1987.

430. Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 66-67.

431. *Ibid.*, pp. 146-147, 152-153, and Ranstorp, pp. 122-123.

432. See also Hunter, p. 69, and Chubin & Tripp, pp. 217-218.

433. Freedman, pp. 267-268.

434. *Le Monde*, May 6, 1987.

435. For a good analysis of Soviet efforts to reconcile Syrian-Iraqi differences, and the convergence of Soviet, Saudi and Jordanian interests in this respect, see Jim Muir's article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, Weekly International Edition, May 18/24, 1987.

436. See also BBC/SWB/ME/8564/A/4-5 May 11, 1987.

437. See BBC/SWB/ME/8566/A/2 May 13, 1986 and BBC/SWB/ME/8567/A/4-5 May 14, 1987.

438. For an excellent analysis of US policy, see Gary Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement: The Internationalization of the Iran-Iraq War, 1987-1988," in *Neither East Nor West: Iran, the Soviet Union, and the United States*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Mark J. Gasiorowski (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 223-227.

439. BBC/SWB/ME/8565/i May 12, 1987.

440. See Charles Krauthammer's superb piece on the motives behind the reflagging effort, "The Real US Mission in the Gulf," in *The Washington Post*, May 29, 1987, and Freedman, p. 269.

441. Freedman, pp. 271-272. Another important section in the resolution was Paragraph 10, which stipulated that, if necessary, the Security Council would convene again to consider additional measures to guarantee compliance of the involved parties. See also Gary Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," pp. 231-232.

442. Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," p. 232. For more details, also see Chubin and Tripp, p. 229.

443. Hunter, p. 91.

444. See the excellent analysis by Gary Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," pp. 241-242.

445. BBC/SWB/ME/8567/i May 14, 1987, BBC/SWB/ME/8568/i May 15, 1987, and *The Daily Telegraph*, May 19, 1987.

446. *Le Monde*, June 26, 1987, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 418.

447. On June 29, Mauritania broke off diplomatic ties with Iran, citing Tehran's "continuous rejection of any negotiations" to end the Gulf War in order to restore the stability and security of the Gulf region as

the determining factor in its move. France followed suit on July 17. See Hunter, pp. 152-153, Ranstorp, p. 122, and BBC/SWB/ME/8607/i June 30, 1987.

448. BBC/SWB/ME/A/9 May 29, 1987.

449. Lebanese Prime Minister Rashid Karami was killed when a bomb exploded on board his helicopter, planted by hardline Christian elements within Lebanese army intelligence and the air force. The assassination of Karami, who had served as prime minister since 1984, dealt a major blow to Syrian prestige and Sunni aspirations in Lebanon, dimming prospects for a political resolution to the civil war. He had been one of the main proponents of reforming the confessional-based political system, and believed that only Syria could restore peace and security as a pre-requisite for much needed political changes. The Phalangists had denounced him as a "citizen of Syria." In the aftermath of his death, Syria reacted by redoubling its efforts to reconcile differences among its fractious Lebanese allies in order to form a united front against its adversaries and regain the initiative. The move was heralded by the reconciliation between Nabih Berri and Walid Jumblatt at a meeting in Damascus on June 17, and the formation of a broad coalition under Syrian auspices on July 23: the Unification and Liberation Front was composed of the PSP, Amal, the Lebanese Communist Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, the Popular Nasserite Organization, the Lebanese Ba'th Party and the Arab Democratic Party. See *Middle East International*, June 27, 1987, *The Christian Science Monitor*, Weekly International Edition, June 29-July 5, 1987, *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 520, Hiro, pp. 128-129, O'Ballance, pp.178-179, and Winslow, p. 262.

450. See BBC/SWB/ME/8585/A/1-2 June 4, 1987.

451. During his two-day visit to the Federal Republic, Larijani held high-level meetings with Chancellor Kohl, Foreign Minister Genscher and Economics Minister Bangemann to discuss the expansion and consolidation of German-Iranian relations. Also in BBC/SWB/ME/8585/A/1-2 June 4, 1987.

452. *Le Monde*, June 26, 1987, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 419.

453. *Middle East International*, June 27, 1987.

454. See *The Guardian*, June 23, 1987, and *Middle East International*, June 27, 1987.

455. BBC/SWB/ME/8599/i June 20, 1987.

456. *Le Monde*, June 23 and 26, 1987.

457. BBC/SWB/ME/8603/i, and *The Guardian*, June 25, 1987.

458. BBC/SWB/ME/8604/A/8-9 June 26, 1987.

459. *Le Monde*, June 26, 1987.

460. BBC/SWB/ME/8608/i July 1, 1987.

461. See *The International Herald Tribune*, July 13, 1987, and *Le Monde*, July 14, 1987.

462. According to an article by Robert Fisk that appeared in *The Times* on July 14, the Syrians had snubbed the Iranian prime minister to show their displeasure with Iran. On the other hand, another report in *Le Monde* on June 26 indicated that the visit had been postponed due to the poor health of Syrian Prime Minister al-Kasm, who had to be hospitalized.

463. *The Guardian*, July 13, 1987, and *Le Monde*, July 14, 1987.
464. *The Financial Times*, July 13, 1987. According to the Lebanese daily, *Al-Safir*, al-Shara asked for Tehran's assistance to gain the release of all foreign hostages in Lebanon. Also see *The Guardian*, July 23, 1987.
465. See *The Guardian*, July 13, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8619/A/1-2 July 14, 1987.
466. BBC/SWB/ME/8620/A/3 July 15, 1987.
467. BBC/SWB/ME/8620/A/2 July 15, 1987.
468. For an example of Syrian denunciation of US Gulf policy, see BBC/SWB/ME/8633/A/2 July 30, 1987.
469. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, pp. 646-647.
470. Iraq's *Al-Thawrah*, July 29, 1987. Also see BBC/SWB/ME/8634/i July 31, 1987.
471. *Ibid.*
472. Cordesman & Wagner, p. 301, and *The Guardian*, August 6, 1987.
473. See also Chubin and Tripp, pp. 175-176.
474. *Le Monde*, August 4, 1987. Assad reportedly promised Sheikholislam he would contact the Saudis to facilitate the return of the Iranian dead from Mecca. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 646.
475. See BBC/SWB/ME/8637/i August 4, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8638/A/10 August 5, 1987. According to IRNA, while expressing sympathy for Iran's plight, Khaddam asserted: "Undoubtedly, the first fruit of this incident will be reaped by the Americans."
476. *Le Monde*, August 8, 1987, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 126.
477. *Le Monde*, August 8, 1987. See Khomeini's anti-Saudi statements in in BBC/SWB/ME/8637/i August 4, 1987.
478. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 126, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 19, 1987.
479. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 126.
480. *Ibid.*
481. BBC/SWB/ME/8640/i August 7, 1987. Another envoy, President Khamene'i's chief advisor, Mir Salim, had been dispatched a few days earlier to Islamabad and Ankara to secure Pakistani and Turkish support. The Turks apparently offered to provide their good offices to defuse tensions between Riyadh and Tehran. See BBC/SWB/ME/8640/A/2-3 August 7, 1987.
482. *Le Monde*, August 7, 1987, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 19, 1987.
483. *Le Monde*, August 8, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8640/A/11-12 August 7, 1987. In an interview, al-Shara declared: "US conspiracies have placed our region in a dangerous position, and the aim of

colonialism is to make use of every possible means to confront the Islamic revolution of Iran. The hoisting of flags and the sending of fleets to the Gulf, and now the tragic events of the Holy Mecca, are attempts by the USA to achieve this vile aim. Naturally, the USA is responsible for these events."

484. BBC/SWB/ME/8640/A/12 August 7, 1987.

485. On August 9, Iran's ambassador to Syria, Mohammad Hassan Akhtari, held talks with al-Shara on recent developments. BBC/SWB/ME/8643/A/15 August 11, 1987.

486. *Al-Thawrah*, August 11, 1987. For further examples of Syrian criticism of US Gulf policy, see BBC/SWB/ME/8644/A/6 August 12, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8646/A/1 August 14, 1987.

487. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, pp. 126-127.

488. *The Financial Times*, August 17, 1987, and *The Guardian*, August 19, 1987.

489. BBC/SWB/ME/8649/i August 18, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8652/A/2-3 August 21, 1987.

490. *The Guardian*, and *The Times*, August 24, 1987.

491. *The Financial Times*, August 24, 1987.

492. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 127.

493. BBC/SWB/ME/8654/i August 24, 1987. Going into the meeting, Tunisian Foreign Minister Hedi Mabrouk candidly admitted that the Arab League would seriously consider "a rupture in relations with Tehran." See *The International Herald Tribune*, August 25, 1987.

494. *The Daily Telegraph*, August 25, 1987.

495. *The Financial Times*, August 25, 1987.

496. BBC/SWB/ME/8655/i August 25, 1987.

497. *The Financial Times*, August 24, 1987.

498. *The Financial Times*, August 25, 1987.

499. *The Financial Times*, August 26, 1987. During the second day of the deliberations, al-Shara asserted that the hostilities could not be brought to an end "except within the framework of a unified Arab stand and a comprehensive, cohesive strategy that does not seek to turn Iran into an enemy of the Arabs. Rather, efforts to end the war should be joined with efforts to establish good-neighborly relations and cooperation with Iran." BBC/SWB/ME/8656/i August 26, 1987.

500. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 127, and *The Financial Times*, August 26, 1987.

501. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 127.

502. BBC/SWB/ME/8655/i August 25, 1987, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 127.

503. See *The International Herald Tribune*, August 25, 1987, and *Middle East International*, August 28, 1987.

504. *Middle East International*, August 28, 1987.
505. For details and the full text of the resolution, see BBC/SWB/ME/8657/A/3-5 August 27, 1987.
506. For further analysis, see *The Financial Times*, and *The Times*, August 26, 1987.
507. *Middle East International*, August 28, 1987, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 128.
508. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 128, and BBC/SWB/ME/8658/A/1 August 28, 1987. It is interesting to note the sharp contrast in the way the Syrian and Iraqi media presented the Tunis meeting - with both claiming success. See BBC/SWB/ME/8658/A/1-3 August 28, 1987.
509. BBC/SWB/ME/8659/A/11 August 29, 1987.
510. BBC/SWB/ME/8655/i August 25, 1987.
511. *Le Monde*, September 4, 1987.
512. *The Financial Times*, September 2, 1987.
513. BBC/SWB/ME/8664/i September 4, 1987.
514. In a speech commemorating Syrian Navy Day on August 30, Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas condemned the growing presence of NATO warships in the Gulf, describing it as a plot by Washington to open a new front against the Arabs and the Iranian revolution. He reaffirmed Syrian backing for Iran, while denouncing Saddam Hussien as an "agent" of US imperialism and "the butcher of Iraq." BBC/SWB/ME/8661/A/5 September 1, 1987.
515. For details on Libya and South Yemen distancing themselves from Iran, see *The Times*, September 11, 1987, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 11 and 12, 1987, and *Le Monde*, September 12, 1987.
516. *The Financial Times*, August 26, 1987.
517. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 128.
518. In tandem with the war of words against Iran, the Arab news media took an increasingly critical view of Syria's moves to impede the formulation of unified Arab policy against Iran during the Tunis conference, and its continued pursuit of the strategic alliance with Iran. For an example of an Egyptian critique of Syrian conduct, see BBC/SWB/ME/8661/A/6 September 1, 1987.
519. Cordesman and Wagner, pp. 309-311.
520. *Ibid.*, pp. 311-312. Kuwait responded by protesting to the UN Secretariat and Security Council and expelling five Iranian diplomats.
521. *Ibid.*, p. 312. In essence, Iran was willing to accept an informal ceasefire, followed by the identification of the party responsible for the initiation of the conflict, and only then observe a formal ceasefire and comply fully with Resolution 598. However, Iraq demanded a formal ceasefire first and foremost and rejected any linkage with the work of a commission to determine the origins of the war. After Perez de Cuellar reported his findings to the Security Council, the five permanent members decided to give him more time to try to break the impasse. Gary Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," pp. 233-234. The mere fact that Iran was willing to consider a ceasefire contingent upon identification of



Iraq as the aggressor represented a significant departure from the previously stated policy of pursuing the war until final victory and the overthrow of the Iraqi Ba'athi regime. Loss of the initiative in the ground war, and the internationalization of the war at sea, had brought about a fundamental change of heart for at least some if not the majority of Iranian policymakers, regarding the continuation of the hostilities. They were now actively seeking a face-saving way to extricate themselves from inauspicious circumstances.

522. *The Times*, September 14, 1987, and *The Daily Telegraph*, September 18, 1987.

523. BBC/SWB/ME/8677/i September 19, 1987. During the talks, al-Shara emphasized the "common strategic stance" of Syria and Iran on various issues, while Khamene'i "thanked Syria for taking friendly positions in relation with the Islamic Republic...and underscored the need to further strengthen bilateral ties." See also *The Financial Times*, and *The Daily Telegraph*, September 18, 1987.

524. BBC/SWB/ME/8678/i September 21, 1987.

525. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 19, 1987.

526. At this critical juncture, the Syrians revealed publicly that, between 1984 and 1986 they had arranged secret negotiations between Saudi and Iranian officials in West Germany in order to bridge the gap between the two sides and seek a common understanding on the Gulf War. Although the Syrian role had been instrumental in bringing about the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement in 1985-86, Riyadh had been frustrated by Iran's refusal to accept a negotiated settlement in the conflict with Iraq. See Claude Van England's article in *The Christian Science Monitor*, Weekly International Edition, September 14/20, 1987.

527. *The International Herald Tribune*, September 21, 1987.

528. Ibid. In view of the warming of US-Syrian relations, he was careful not to criticize the US naval build-up in the Persian Gulf directly, but warned: "the presence of the fleets in the Gulf creates additional dangers with unpredictable results." Furthermore, on the topic of Lebanon, Assad was keen to downplay Syrian-Hezbollah differences, asserting that Hezbollah's role in domestic unrest had been exaggerated.

529. *The Guardian*, September 22, 1987.

530. BBC/SWB/ME/8687/i September 21, 1987.

531. *Middle East International*, September 26, 1987.

532. Ibid. According to one Western observer, "The Arabs are forced to wait on events at the UN, hoping that someone else will pull the chestnuts out of the fire."

533. BBC/SWB/ME/8679/i September 22, 1987.

534. Ibid. In deference to the Syrians, a sentence was added that the Gulf War weakened "the capacity of the Arab nation to confront the main challenge represented by Israeli aggression." *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 128.

535. *The Guardian*, September 21, 1987, and *The Financial Times*, September 25, 1987.

536. BBC/SWB/ME/8679/i September 22, 1987, and *The Financial Times*, September 25, 1987.

537. See *The Guardian*, September 21, 1987, and *Middle East International*, September 26, 1987.

538. *The Guardian*, and BBC/SWB/ME/8682/i September 25, 1987.
539. BBC/SWB/ME/8685/i September 29, 1986. Iranian radio greeted the Libyan and Syrian announcement, commenting on September 28 that "the coordinated stand of Libya and Syria, which are among the friends of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Arab League, casts doubt on the fate of the extraordinary Amman summit."
540. Also see BBC/SWB/ME/8691/A/9 6 October 1987.
541. *Middle East International*, November 7, 1987, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 128.
542. BBC/SWB/ME/8698/i October 14, 1987.
543. See Cordesman and Wagner, pp. 318-319. The authors concur with Rafsanjani's subsequent assertion that the raid had been deliberately timed by the US to divert attention from the Iranian initiative at the UN.
544. Ibid.
545. See *Al-Sharq Al-Awsaf*, September 22, 1987.
546. For examples of the Syrian media's pro-Iranian position, see *Al-Bath*, September 23, 1987, BBC/SWB/ME/8682/A/2-3 September 25, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8686/A/6-7 September 30, 1987.
547. Two other boats and six personnel were subsequently captured by US Navy SEAL units. Cordesman and Wagner, pp. 325-326.
548. Ibid., pp. 328-329, and Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," p. 226.
549. BBC/SWB/ME/8699/i October 15, 1987.
550. *The Financial Times*, October 19, 1987.
551. See BBC/SWB/ME/8703/i October 20, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8704/A/9 October 21, 1987.
552. *Middle East International*, October 24, 1987, and *The Financial Times*, October 19, 1987.
553. *Middle East International*, October 24, 1987. In the autumn of 1987, Italian authorities discovered that two major Italian armaments firms, Brescia and Valsella (both partly owned by Fiat), were shipping weapons and mines to Iran via Syria. See *The Middle East*, November 1987, p. 18.
554. Ibid.
555. *The Times*, November 5, 1987.
556. Ibid.
557. BBC/SWB/ME/8702/i October 19, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8703/i October 20, 1987.
558. *Middle East International*, October 24, 1987. In tandem with the alleged Musavi-Vorontsov meeting, Iranian Oil Minister Aghazadeh visited Moscow on October 18 and signed an agreement for the export of Iranian crude to the Soviet Union, in exchange for refined petroleum products. See Freedman, p. 274.

559. Cordesman & Wagner, p. 330, and Nadia El-Sayed El-Shazly, *The Gulf Tanker War: Iran and Iraq's Maritime Swordplay* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998), p. 248.
560. BBC/SWB/ME/8704/i October 21, 1987.
561. Ibid.
562. Ibid., and BBC/SWB/ME/8704/A/10 October 21, 1987.
563. BBC/SWB/ME/8704/A/10-11 October 21, 1987. Also see *Al-Ba'th* and *Al-Thawrah*, October 20, 1987.
564. BBC/SWB/ME/8705/A/3-5 October 22, 1987.
565. *The Financial Times*, October 22, 1987.
566. Cordesman & Wagner, p. 332, and R. K. Ramazani, "Iran's Resistance to US Intervention in the Persian Gulf," in *Neither East Nor West: Iran, the Soviet Union, and the United States*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie & Mark J. Gasiorowski (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 43.
567. Chubin and Tripp, p. 218.
568. See Godfrey Jansen's excellent analysis of the situation in *Middle East International*, November 7, 1987.
569. *The Middle East*, December 1987.
570. For more details, see BBC/SWB/ME/8714/i November 2, 1987, *Middle East International*, November 7, 1987, and *The Middle East*, December 1987.
571. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 5, 1987. At the same time, there were promising signs that Syria's economic woes and dependence on foreign oil would be eased by the development of the Dayr al-Zawr oil field. Already in 1987, the field was producing 60,000 b/d of high-quality light crude, and production was expected to increase by another 40,000 b/d in early 1988, thereby significantly decreasing dependence on Iranian oil imports. During 1986, oil imports had contributed \$54 million to the country's total fiscal deficit. See *Le Monde*, October 28, 1987.
572. *The Times*, November 5, 1987, and *The Financial Times*, November 7, 1987.
573. *The International Herald Tribune*, November 4, 1987, and *The Guardian*, November 7, 1987.
574. *The Guardian*, November 7, 1987, and *Le Monde*, November 8/9, 1987.
575. By the end of 1987, Egypt had emerged as a key supplier of arms to Iraq, having sold over \$2 billion worth of war materiel and sent tens of thousands of workers and military volunteers to assist the Iraqi war effort. *The International Herald Tribune*, November 6, 1987.
576. See *The Financial Times*, November 9, 1987, and *The Guardian*, November 13, 1987.
577. *The International Herald Tribune*, November 4, 1987. Libya was represented by Major Jallud, who arrived via Damascus, where he had made a stopover to confer with the Syrians. See *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, pp. 129-130.

578. *The Guardian*, November 13, 1987.
579. *The Financial Times*, November 9, 1987, and *The International Herald Tribune*, November 11, 1987.
580. *The International Herald Tribune*, November 9, 1987.
581. *Le Monde*, November 10, 1987.
582. *The International Herald Tribune*, November 9, 1987.
583. *The Financial Times*, November 10, 1987, and *Le Monde*, November 11, 1987.
584. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 130.
585. *The Financial Times*, November 11, 1987.
586. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 130, and BBC/SWB/ME/8722/A/9 November 11, 1987.
587. *The Guardian*, November 12, 1987.
588. *The Financial Times*, November 10, 1987.
589. *The International Herald Tribune*, November 10, 1987, *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 130, and BBC/SWB/ME/8722/A/9 November 11, 1987.
590. BBC/SWB/ME/8722/A/9, and *The International Herald Tribune*, November 11, 1987.
591. *Ibid.*
592. BBC/SWB/ME/8722/A/9-10 November 11, 1987, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 130.
593. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 131.
594. See article in *The Jordan Times*, November 11, 1987, by Lamis Andoni, and also BBC/SWB/ME/8723/A/9-10 November 12, 1987.
595. *Ibid.*
596. *The Financial Times*, and *The Jordan Times*, November 11, 1987.
597. *The Financial Times*, November 11, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/8723/A/11 November 12, 1987.
598. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 131.
599. *The Financial Times*, November 11, 1987.
600. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 131, and *The Jordan Times*, November 11, 1987.
601. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 131.
602. *Ibid.*, and *Middle East International*, November 21, 1987.

603. For more details, see *The Financial Times*, November 12, 1987, *Le Monde*, November 13, 1987, *Middle East International*, November 21, 1987, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, pp. 131-132.
604. *The Financial Times*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, November 12, 1987, and *Le Monde*, November 13, 1987.
605. *The Financial Times*, November 12, 1987.
606. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 131.
607. Ibid. Also see *Middle East International*, November 21, 1987.
608. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 131.
609. *The Guardian*, November 13, 1987.
610. Also see *The Times*, November 13, 1987.
611. *The Financial Times*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, November 12, 1987.
612. Ibid.
613. *The International Herald Tribune*, November 12, 1987, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 1, 1987.
614. *Le Monde*, November 11, 1987, and *The Financial Times*, November 12, 1987.
615. See *Middle East International*, November 21, 1987, and *The Financial Times*, December 1, 1987.
616. See also *The Guardian*, November 13, 1987, and *The International Herald Tribune*, November 14/15, 1987.
617. *Middle East International*, November 21, 1987.
618. *The Financial Times*, November 13, 1987.
619. *The International Herald Tribune*, November 13, 1987.
620. *Middle East International*, November 21, 1987.
621. See also *The International Herald Tribune*, November 11, 1987, and *The Guardian*, November 13, 1987.
622. Ibid.
623. See Godfrey Jansen's accurate analysis in *Middle East International*, November 21, 1987.
624. Ibid.
625. *Middle East International*, November 21, 1987.
626. See *Le Monde*, and BBC/SWB/ME/8723/A/11 November 12, 1987. At this juncture, only Oman,

Jordan, Somalia and Sudan had normal relations with Egypt. See *The International Herald Tribune*, November 13, 1987. In an interview with *The Jordan Times* on November 11, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Ramadan stated that Baghdad would resume full diplomatic relations with Cairo.

627. For more details, see *Le Monde*, and *The Guardian*, November 12, 1987, *The International Herald Tribune*, November 13 and 14/15, 1987, *Le Monde*, November 15/16, 1987, *The International Herald Tribune*, November 16 and 17, 1987, BBC/SWB/ME/0001/i November 16, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/0003/i November 18, 1987.

628. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 132.

629. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

630. BBC/SWB/ME/0001/i November 16, 1987. In a poignant statement broadcast on Damascus radio on November 12, partially reflecting a volte face, a Syrian official stated that the government "has not approved any phrase which harms or provokes Iran. It has not bargained nor has anyone bargained over this relationship. Syria has always emphasized its good relations with Iran and its keenness on the continuation and constancy of this relationship. Syria considers its relationship with Iran a force for Syria, the Arab nation, and Iran."

631. See also BBC/SWB/ME/0002/A/7 November 17, 1987. In an interview with a group of reporters in December, Vice-President Khaddam refuted King Hussein's assertions that both Israel and Iran coveted Arab land. He asserted: "Iran is an Islamic state. There are differences between Iran and some Arab states. We believe that these differences can and must be settled. Iran has no designs on the Arab homeland...The matter is different with the Israeli enemy. The Israeli enemy has designs on our territory." See BBC/SWB/ME/0033/A/2 December 23, 1987.

632. *Middle East International*, November 21, 1987.

633. BBC/SWB/ME/0003/i November 18, 1987.

634. *The Daily Telegraph*, November 18, 1987.

635. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 134. See also *The Daily Telegraph*, November 23, 1987.

636. For more background and details, see *The Financial Times*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, November 26, 1987, *Le Monde*, November 27, 1987, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, December 1, 1987, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 134. According to the Kuwaiti daily *Al-Watan*, on December 14, the head of Syrian Military Intelligence, Colonel Ali Duba, met with a senior Iraqi security official on the Syrian-Iraqi frontier in mid-December to discuss normalization of bilateral relations. See also BBC/SWB/ME/0026/i December 15, 1987.

637. BBC/SWB/ME/0014/A/2 December 1, 1987.

638. In a subsequent interview on December 18, Prime Minister Musavi bitterly criticized those Arab leaders in Amman whom he described as "reactionary" and "obsessed with racism." He stated that Iran's strong relations with Libya and Syria disproved the "propaganda of the Ba'thist-Saddamist system on the Arab-versus-Persian nature of the war." See BBC/SWB/ME/0029/A/3 December 18, 1987.

639. See *The International Herald Tribune*, November 26, 1987, and Cordesman & Wagner, p. 359. The authors also support the view that the devastating losses suffered by Iran during Operation Karbala 5 had led to a decline in morale and hampered the government's mobilization effort.

640. Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," p. 227.
641. *Middle East International*, November 21, 1987.
642. BBC/SWB/ME/0032/i December 22, 1987, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1987*, p. 134.
643. See *The Financial Times*, December 24, 1987, *Le Monde*, December 30, 1987, BBC/SWB/ME/0034/i December 24, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/0036/i December 30, 1987.
644. Cordesman and Wagner, pp. 337, 359.
645. *Le Monde*, December 30 and 31, 1987.
646. See *The Financial Times*, December 30, 1987, *Le Monde*, December 31, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/0036/i December 30, 1987.
647. *Le Monde*, December 31, 1987.
648. During al-Shara's visits to Tehran on December 22 and 29, on both occasions he delivered messages from Assad to Khamene'i. On his first stopover, he also held talks with Velayati and Musavi. For more details, see *The Financial Times*, December 24, 1987, *Le Monde*, December 30, 1987, BBC/SWB/ME/0034/i December 24, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/0036/i December 30, 1987.
649. Also see BBC/SWB/ME/0038/A/5 January 1, 1988, and *The Daily Telegraph*, January 2, 1988.
650. *The Financial Times*, January 6, 1988, and *The International Herald Tribune*, January 8, 1988.
651. *The Times*, January 4, 1988, and Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," p. 235.
652. BBC/SWB/ME/0044/i January 9, 1988, and *The Financial Times*, January 8, 1988.
653. See Godfrey Jansen's article in *Middle East International*, January 23, 1988, p. 12, and *The International Herald Tribune*, January 8, 1988.
654. See also *The Times*, January 4, 1988, and *The Financial Times*, January 6, 1988.
655. *The Financial Times*, January 8, 1988, and *The International Herald Tribune*, January 9/10, 1988.
656. See *The International Herald Tribune*, January 8, 1988, and *Middle East International*, January 23, 1988.
657. The media in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain criticized the other Gulf states for responding favorably to Syrian entreaties to reconcile differences with Iran. See *Middle East International*, January 23, 1988.
658. *The Guardian*, January 11, 1988, and *The Times*, January 12, 1988.
659. *Ibid.*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, January 13, 1988.
660. *The Financial Times*, January 18, 1988.
661. *The Financial Times*, January 13, 1988.

662. *The Financial Times*, January 12, 1988.
663. *The Guardian*, January 9, 1988. Reportedly, Egypt had already received about \$1 billion from the GCC in the period prior to Mubarak's visit.
664. *The Times*, January 12, 1988.
665. *Le Monde*, January 14, 1988.
666. *The Financial Times*, January 16, 1988.
667. Cordesman and Wagner, pp. 362-363. Two days before the offensive, Iran's ambassador to Syria held a meeting with Faruq al-Shara and handed him a note from his Iranian counterpart concerning developments in the Gulf conflict. See BBC/SWB/ME/0051/A/8 January 18, 1988.
668. *The Financial Times*, January 18, 1988, and *The International Herald Tribune*, January 27, 1988.
669. Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," p. 235.
670. See *The International Herald Tribune*, January 27, 1988.
671. *The Financial Times*, February 18, 1988.
672. See *The Financial Times*, January 18, 1988, and Cordesman & Wagner, p. 363.
673. Cordesman and Wagner, p. 363.
674. *The Financial Times*, January 20, 1988.
675. See BBC/SWB/ME/0057/A/4-5 January 25, 1988. On January 21, the Baghdad-based radio, Voice of the National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria, in one of its commentaries depicted the Gulf conflict as an "Arab-Persian war" in which the Arab people from "the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf" would participate. It emphasized that Iraq had been defending the entire Arab nation for seven years, and deserved Arab support to protect the Arabs against the "Persian danger." It went on to conclude that "regional peace cannot be ensured if Iraq is not safe, proud, and victorious."
676. See BBC/SWB/ME/0060/A/2-3 January 28, 1988. Tareq Aziz implicitly blamed Syria's deviant stand for Iran's insistence on prosecuting the war. He stated: "No country, not even the backward and bigoted Iran, can continue aggression if it finds in its face a brave and capable resistance."
677. *Le Monde*, January 29, 1988.
678. *The International Herald Tribune*, February 4, 1988. Besides describing Syrian moves as "treacherous," Iraqi officials were concerned that Syria's activities in the Gulf were undercutting the UN Security Council debate to impose an arms embargo on Iran.
679. See also BBC/SWB/ME/0064/A/5-6 February 2, 1988.
680. For examples of statements by Syrian officials and commentaries in the media, see BBC/SWB/ME/0038/A/5 January 1, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0066/A/3-4 February 4, 1988.
681. See *Al-Bath*, January 28, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0064/A/6 February 2, 1988.



682. BBC/SWB/ME/0066/A/3-4 February 4, 1988.
683. *Le Monde*, January 29, 1988.
684. *Le Monde*, February 2, 1988.
685. See BBC/SWB/ME/0063/i February 1, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0065/A/4 February 3, 1988. Al-Shara expressed dismay at Iraq's "trouble-making" in the region and asserted that Iran and Syria were in agreement on the need to exert efforts to reduce tensions in the Gulf and establish amicable relations between Tehran and the Arab sheikhdoms. *Le Monde*, February 2, 1988.
686. Cordesman & Wagner, p. 368, and Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," p. 237.
687. Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," p. 236, and Freedman, p. 280.
688. Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," p. 238.
689. For more details, see Cordesman & Wagner, pp. 363-368, and also Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," pp. 238-240.
690. *The Financial Times*, March 1, 1988.
691. See also *The International Herald Tribune*, March 3, 1988.
692. Cordesman and Wagner, pp. 367-368.
693. Cordesman and Wagner, p. 368. This was highlighted by a major raid on Kharg Island on March 19, with two tankers being set ablaze and 46 crewmen dying.
694. *The International Herald Tribune*, March 8, 1988.
695. BBC/SWB/ME/0097/i March 11, 1988.
696. For more details, see Cordesman & Wagner, pp. 369-370, and Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," pp. 238-239.
697. Cordesman & Wagner, pp. 370-372, and Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," pp. 239-240.
698. *Ibid.*
699. Cordesman and Wagner, pp. 372-373. In response to the Halabjah massacre, the UN subsequently sent a team of experts to investigate the matter in greater detail.
700. *Ibid.*, pp. 371-372.
701. See Hiro, p. 130, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1988*, p. 630.
702. *The International Herald Tribune*, March 31, 1988.
703. Hiro, p. 130, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1988*, p. 630.
704. For more details on Hezbollah's growth and activities within the Shi'ite community, see See Jim Muir's articles in *Middle East International*, July 25, 1987, p. 6, and December 19, 1987, pp. 6-7, Robert

Fisk's piece in *The Times*, November 14, 1987, *The Jerusalem Post*, November 13, 1987, Hiro, pp. 129-130, Olmert, p. 183, O'Ballance, p. 180, Ranstorp, p. 100, BBC/SWB/ME/8693/i October 6, 1987, BBC/SWB/ME/8713/A/10 October 31, 1987, and BBC/SWB/ME/0115/A/6 April 1, 1988.

705. *Middle East International*, July 25, 1987.

706. For further details on these events, see *Le Monde*, September 2, 1987, *The Times*, September 9, 1987, and O'Ballance, p. 180.

707. BBC/SWB/ME/8715/A/10 November 3, 1987. Also refer to Robert Fisk's piece in *The Times*, November 14, 1987, and Jim Muir's article in *Middle East International*, December 19, 1987, p. 7. In addition, with Iranian assistance, Hezbollah set up a television and radio station in the Bekaa. Hiro, p. 130.

708. BBC/SWB/ME/8719/i November 7, 1987.

709. See also Hiro, p. 131.

710. Ibid.

711. Hezbollah accused Higgins of being a CIA operative. Higgins had previously served as an aide to US Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger during 1985-87. For more details, see *The Financial Times*, February 20, 1988, *The International Herald Tribune*, February 22, 1988, *Middle East International*, March 5, 1988, O'Ballance, p. 182, and Ranstorp, p. 124.

712. *The International Herald Tribune*, February 22, 1988, and Ranstorp, p. 101.

713. See Ranstorp, pp. 100-101, 124.

714. Based on conflicting accounts, between 20 and 150 were arrested. See *The Guardian* and *The International Herald Tribune*, February 22, 1988, and *Middle East International*, March 5, 1988.

715. See *The International Herald Tribune*, February 22, 1988, *The Guardian*, February 23, 1988, *The International Herald Tribune*, February 27/28, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0106/A/8 March 22, 1988. Ranstorp actually argues that the kidnapping was masterminded by Sheikh Abdul Karim Obeid, the local leader of Hezbollah's military wing, and Mustafa al-Dirani. Ranstorp, p. 101.

716. See Safa Haeri's piece in *Middle East International*, March 5, 1988, pp. 13-14.

717. BBC/SWB/ME/0106/A/8 March 22, 1988.

718. See Hiro, p. 132, *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1988*, p. 630, and Winslow, p. 265.

719. Ibid.

720. BBC/SWB/ME/0121/i April 9, 1988.

721. BBC/SWB/ME/0122/i April 11, 1988, Hiro, p. 132, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1988*, p. 630.

722. See BBC/SWB/ME/0122/i April 11, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0126/i April 15, 1988.

723. See also Winslow, p. 266.

724. Cordesman and Wagner, pp. 373-374.
725. Ibid., pp. 375-377.
726. For more background information on the events at Faw, and a concise chronology of US-Iran hostilities in the Gulf, see *The Guardian*, April 19, 1988, and *The Financial Times*, April 23/24, 1988.
727. For a good overview of the Iranian perspective on the US military intervention in the Gulf, see Nader Entessar, "Superpowers and the Persian Gulf Security: An Iranian Perspective," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 4 October 1988, pp. 1427-1451.
728. The very next day, on April 19, the daily *Al-Thawrah* lambasted American policy, accusing Washington of escalating tensions and pursuing hegemonic ambitions to turn the Gulf into a "US lake." It argued that by becoming a "direct party" in the war, the Reagan administration was now revealing its conspiracy against the Arab nation and its allies. See also BBC/SWB/ME/0131/A/2-3 April 21, 1988.
729. See *Le Monde*, April 26, 1988.
730. BBC/SWB/ME/0134/ia April 25, 1988.
731. *Le Monde*, and BBC/SWB/ME/0135/A/2 April 26, 1988.
732. BBC/SWB/ME/0158/i May 23, 1988.
733. For more details, see BBC/SWB/ME/0161/i May 26, 1988, BBC/SWB/ME/0163/i May 28, 1988, and Cordesman & Wagner, pp. 381-383.
734. See BBC/SWB/ME/0164/i May 30, 1988, and also Cordesman & Wagner, p. 383. In a speech on the same day, Saddam Hussein boasted that Iraq had achieved military superiority over its foe, asserting "time favors us rather than the Iranians."
735. Cordesman and Wagner, p. 387. See also BBC/SWB/ME/0161/i May 26, 1988.
736. For details of the operation, see Cordesman & Wagner, pp. 388-389, and BBC/SWB/ME/0188/i June 27, 1988.
737. Cordesman and Wagner, p. 389.
738. BBC/SWB/ME/0134/ia April 25, 1988.
739. *Le Monde*, May 7, 1988, and Winslow, p. 266.
740. BBC/SWB/ME/0140/i May 2, 1988.
741. See *Middle East International*, May 14, 1988, *The Financial Times*, May 12 and 20, 1988, *The International Herald Tribune*, May 19, 1988, and Hiro, p. 132. The Israelis later claimed that eight Iranians were among the dead at Maydoun. BBC/SWB/ME/0147/i May 10, 1988.
742. Ranstorp, p. 101.
743. *Le Monde*, May 7, 1988.
744. *The Financial Times*, May 7/8 1988, BBC/SWB/ME/0146/i May 9, 1988, and O'Ballance, pp. 182-

183.

745. See Michael Jansen's excellent analysis of the situation in *Middle East International*, May 14, 1988, p. 3-4.

746. Ibid.

747. Ibid. In addition, as events unfolded in subsequent days, it quickly became apparent that Damascus had also misjudged the morale and military prowess of its own surrogate.

748. See also Hiro, p. 132.

749. For a good overview of the situation, see *The Financial Times*, May 12, 1988.

750. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1988*, p. 631, O'Ballance, p. 183, and *Middle East International*, May 14, 1988. Reportedly, the operations were coordinated and supervised by Iranian Revolutionary Guard instructors. See *The Financial Times*, May 9, 1988.

751. *Le Monde*, May 8/9, 1988.

752. See *The Financial Times*, and *Le Monde*, May 10, 1988, BBC/SWB/ME/0147/i May 10, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0149/i May 12, 1988.

753. Ibid.

754. *Middle East International*, May 14, 1988.

755. *The Financial Times*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, May 14/15, 1988.

756. *Le Monde*, May 15/16, 1988.

757. Much to Damascus' consternation, PLO fighters in Shatila and Bourj al-Barajneh overpowered pro-Syrian dissidents and subsequently threw their weight behind Hezbollah's effort to oust Amal from the suburbs. See *The Financial Times* and *The International Herald Tribune*, May 17, 1988.

758. For more details, see *The Financial Times*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, May 12, 1988.

759. BBC/SWB/ME/0150/i May 13, 1988.

760. *The Financial Times*, and *Le Monde*, May 13, 1988.

761. BBC/SWB/ME/0150/i May 13, 1988. The truce was arranged by Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholislam, Syrian Brigadier Ali Hammoud and representatives from the two Shi'ite militias.

762. See *The Financial Times*, May 12, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0150/i May 13, 1988. The joint security force included 72 Iranian Revolutionary Guards and 36 Syrian soldiers.

763. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1988*, p. 632.

764. Ibid., Hiro, p. 132, and O'Ballance, p. 183.

765. *The Financial Times*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, May 14/15, 1988, and *Le Monde*, May 15/16, 1988.

766. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 14/15 1988.
767. *Le Monde*, May 15/16, 1988.
768. See also *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1988*, p. 632.
769. *The Financial Times*, May 16, 1988. At the time, there were major discrepancies in the figures given for the number of casualties.
770. *Le Monde*, May 15/16, 1988.
771. *The Financial Times*, May 16, 1988.
772. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 16, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0153/i May 17, 1988.
773. *The Financial Times*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, May 16, 1988. The Syrian force included sixty tanks. See *Le Monde*, May 17, 1988.
774. O'Ballance, p. 183.
775. BBC/SWB/ME/0154/i May 18, 1988, and *The Guardian*, May 20, 1988.
776. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 17, 1988.
777. *Ibid.*, and *The Financial Times*, May 18, 1988.
778. See BBC/SWB/ME/0153/i May 17, 1988, BBC/SWB/ME/0154/i May 18, 1988, and *Le Monde*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, May 18, 1988.
779. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 17, 1988.
780. BBC/SWB/ME/0154/i May 18, 1988.
781. For example, Sheikh Fadlallah elucidated that there was "no obstacle" to Syrian entry into Dahiya, but said earlier that a direct Syrian presence was not necessary to stop the bloodshed. See text of a Radio Monte Carlo interview with Fadlallah in BBC/SWB/ME/0152/6-8 May 16, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0153/i May 17, 1988.
782. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 17, 1988.
783. *The Financial Times*, May 17, 1988.
784. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 17, 1988. For more details, see *Le Monde*, May 7 and 13, 1988, and *The Financial Times*, May 19, 1988.
785. See *Le Monde*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, May 18, 1988, and *The Financial Times*, May 19, 1988.
786. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 19, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0156/i May 20, 1988. During a brief visit to Damascus on May 21, the US ambassador to the UN, Vernon Walters, expressed concern about the fate of the hostages during a meeting with Hafez Assad, and cautioned against a forceful Syrian entry into the suburbs. See *Middle East International*, June 11, 1988.

787. *The Financial Times*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, May 17, 1988, and *Le Monde*, May 18, 1988.
788. BBC/SWB/ME/0155/i May 19, 1988.
789. *The Financial Times*, May 18, 1988.
790. See *The International Herald Tribune*, and *Le Monde*, May 18, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0155/i May 19, 1988.
791. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 18, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0156/i May 20, 1988.
792. *Le Monde*, May 18, 1988.
793. *Le Monde*, May 20, 1988.
794. *The International Herald Tribune*, May 18, 1988, *Le Monde*, May 19, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0155/i May 19, 1988.
795. *The Financial Times*, May 18, 1988.
796. *Le Monde*, May 19, 1988.
797. *The Financial Times*, May 18, 1988, and *Le Monde*, May 19, 1988.
798. Also see Jim Muir's excellent analysis of Iranian tactics in *Middle East International*, May 28, 1988, p. 4.
799. See BBC/SWB/ME/0156/i May 20, 1988. In a radio interview later that day, Kan'an posited that Syria had decided to delay entry into Dahiya "to give an opportunity for the success of the ongoing political efforts."
800. *Le Monde*, May 19, 1988.
801. Ibid., and *The Financial Times*, May 18, 1988. Following a meeting with Lebanese Prime Minister Selim al-Hoss, Besharati explained that the issue of a Syrian troop deployment had "ceased to exist." BBC/SWB/ME/0156/i May 20, 1988.
802. BBC/SWB/ME/0156/i May 20, 1988.
803. *The Financial Times*, May 19, 1988.
804. BBC/SWB/ME/0156/i May 20, 1988.
805. See the thorough analysis by Harvey Morris in *The Independent*, May 25, 1988.
806. *The Financial Times*, May 19, 1988.
807. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1988*, pp. 632-633.
808. See Jonathan Randal's article in *The International Herald Tribune*, May 25, 1988.
809. See John Cooley's article in *The International Herald Tribune*, May 19, 1988.

810. Olmert, p. 184.
811. *The Financial Times*, May 19, 1988, and *The International Herald Tribune*, May 25, 1988.
812. Olmert, p. 184.
813. See also *The Financial Times*, May 19, 1988, and *The International Herald Tribune*, May 25, 1988.
814. *The Financial Times*, and *Le Monde*, May 20, 1988.
815. See the text of the interviews with Besharati, Kan'an and Berri in BBC/SWB/ME/0156/A/1-3 May 20, 1988.
816. *The Financial Times*, May 20, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0157/i May 21, 1988.
817. See the text of the interview by Françoise Chipaux in *Le Monde*, May 21, 1988.
818. *The Guardian*, May 23, 1988.
819. BBC/SWB/ME/0158/i May 23, 1988. Later, Hezbollah information officer Ali Hashem added that they had no problem with Syria and, in fact, they were strategic partners in the struggle against the US and Israel. He explained that a political disagreement had arisen with Amal, in view of the latter's attempts to impede the Islamic resistance to the occupation in south Lebanon and its efforts to annihilate Hezbollah. Hashem left the door open to political dialogue to resolve intra-Shi'ite differences. *Le Monde*, May 24, 1988.
820. BBC/SWB/ME/0161/i May 26, 1988.
821. *The Financial Times*, May 21/22, 1988.
822. *Le Monde*, May 22/23, 1988. Kan'an held talks with Besharati in Damascus.
823. BBC/SWB/ME/0158/i May 23, 1988.
824. See *The Guardian*, May 23, 1988, *The Financial Times*, May 25, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0158/i May 23, 1988.
825. *The Financial Times*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, May 24, 1988, and *The Independent*, May 25, 1988.
826. *Ibid.*, For more details also see *Middle East International*, May 28, 1988, Hiro, p. 133, and Ranstorp, p. 125.
827. *Al-Safir*, May 27, 1988. Also see Hiro, p. 133.
828. *The Financial Times*, May 25, 1988, and O'Ballance, p. 183.
829. See *The Independent*, *The International Herald Tribune*, and *The Financial Times*, May 25, 1988.
830. *Ibid.*, and *Le Monde*, May 27, 1988.
831. See BBC/SWB/ME/0161/i May 26, 1988, BBC/SWB/ME/0163/i May 28, 1988, *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, May 27, 1988.

832. See BBC/SWB/ME/0163/A/4 May 28, 1988, Hiro, p. 133, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1988*, pp. 632-633.
833. Ranstorp, p. 125.
834. *The Daily Telegraph*, May 27, 1988.
835. *The International Herald Tribune*, and *The Financial Times*, May 27, 1988.
836. *The Financial Times*, May 27, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0163/i May 28, 1988.
837. Ibid.
838. *The Daily Telegraph*, and *The International Herald Tribune*, May 27, 1988. Other sources claim that there were more than 400 or 500 dead, and 2,000 wounded. See *The Financial Times*, May 28/29, 1988, *The Independent*, May 30, 1988, and Hiro, p. 133. There were also conflicting figures on the number of displaced people ranging from 60 to 600 thousand. In addition, there was extensive collateral damage during the fighting. See also *The Financial Times*, May 27 and 28/29, 1988, *The International Herald Tribune*, May 28/29 and 30, 1988, and *The Guardian*, May 30, 1988.
839. BBC/SWB/ME/0163/i and *Le Monde*, May 28, 1988, *The International Herald Tribune*, May 28/29, 1988, and Winslow, p. 266.
840. BBC/SWB/ME/0164/i May 30, 1988.
841. Ibid., *Middle East International*, June 11, 1988, Hiro, p. 133, and *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1988*, p. 633.
842. BBC/SWB/ME/0167/i June 2, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0168/i June 3, 1988.
843. See Hiro, p. 133.
844. See *The Guardian*, May 30, 1988, and *Le Monde*, May 31, 1988.
845. BBC/SWB/ME/0164/i May 30, 1988.
846. See Jim Muir's analysis in *Middle East International*, June 11, 1988, pp. 5-6.
847. See also *The Times*, May 28, 1988, and *The Independent*, May 30, 1988.
848. See *The Times*, May 28, 1988, and *Middle East International*, May 28, 1988. In an interview towards the end of the crisis, Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati dismissed reports about the imminent collapse of the alliance with Syria as completely baseless. He pointed out that the two sides had shown restraint, and relations remained on a firm footing. Velayati stated: "Our ties with Syria are friendly and fraternal and, God willing, will remain so." BBC/SWB/ME/0164/A/4 May 30, 1988.
849. *Le Monde*, May 26, 1988.
850. Ranstorp, p. 125.
851. See Tony Walker's article, "Syrian Oil Industry Gets Into Gear," in *The Financial Times*, October 21, 1988. By now, Syria was producing some 250,000 b/d.



852. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1988*, p. 144.
853. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
854. *Middle East International*, June 24, 1988.
855. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1988*, p. 148.
856. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
857. *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149.
858. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
859. BBC/SWB/ME/0196/ib July 6, 1988.
860. For general information on the incident, see Cordesman and Wagner, pp. 390-394.
861. See Entessar, "Superpowers and Persian Gulf Security," p. 1447, and *The New York Times*, July 5, 1988.
862. For more details on the cover-up and subsequent revelations, see the transcript of a special American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) News *Nightline* Program, "Sea of Lies," aired on July 7, 1992, and the *Newsweek* cover story with the same title also published on July 13, 1992. The television program and the magazine article were the result of a special joint ABC-Newsweek investigation conducted over a four-year period. Further revelations were made on the BBC World two-part television program, *Correspondent*, entitled "The Other Lockerbie," aired in April 2000.
863. See *Kayhan*, July 5, 1988.
864. Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," p. 240.
865. For more details on the Syrian reaction, and that of other Arab states, see BBC/SWB/ME/0196/A/7-8 July 6, 1988.
866. Cordesman and Wagner, pp. 395-396.
867. *Ibid.*, p. 396.
868. *Ibid.*, pp. 396-397, Entessar, p. 1450, and Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," pp. 240-241.
869. BBC/SWB/ME/0208/A/1 July 20, 1988.
870. Cordesman and Wagner, p. 397.
871. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1988*, p. 740.
872. See *Al-Thawrah*, July 19, 1988.
873. BBC/SWB/ME/0207/i July 19, 1988.
874. See Cordesman & Wagner, p. 398, and El-Shazly, pp. 257 and 356.

875. Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," p. 241.

876. For examples of Syria's anti-Iraqi rhetoric, see BBC/SWB/ME/0214/A/2-3 July 27, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/0224/A/6-7 August 8, 1988.

877. Cordesman & Wagner, pp. 398-399, and Sick, "Slouching Toward Settlement," p. 241.

878. For more details, see BBC/SWB/ME/0230/i August 15, 1988, and BBC/SWB/ME/231/i August 16, 1988. Velayati also submitted a message from Ali Khamene'i to the Syrian leadership. BBC/SWB/ME/0232/A/1 August 17, 1988.

879. BBC/SWB/ME/0233/A/4 August 18, 1988.

880. For an excellent example, see the transcript of a Damascus radio broadcast on August 16 in BBC/SWB/ME/0233/A/3 August 18, 1988.

881. BBC/SWB/ME/0241/A/4 August 27, 1988.

## CONCLUSION: A DECADE ON, THE ALLIANCE ENDURES

During the two-year period (August 1988 - August 1990) between the cessation of the Gulf hostilities and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, many observers predicted the imminent demise of the Syrian-Iranian alliance. However, the partnership endured and still stands today at the start of the twenty-first century. Why did the strategic relationship between Damascus and Tehran continue, despite their inability to bring Saddam Hussein to his knees and to stabilize the situation in Lebanon by 1988? There was ample reason for the Syrian and Iranian regimes to perpetuate their special relationship during the interwar years between the two Gulf conflicts and in the post-Cold War era.

First and foremost, incessant speculation that the days of the Syrian-Iranian nexus were numbered proved to be unfounded: many analysts failed to recognize that the continuous consultations between the two allies and their ability to compromise on key issues, build mutual trust and maintain cooperative links during the troubled years of 1985-88 had led to the consolidation of the alliance. Over time, their common ability accurately to assess the evolving regional situation, to recognize the limits of their power and to set feasible goals lent stability to the alliance. Both Damascus and Tehran also understood that their activities in the other's sphere of influence had to be within certain limits and subject to the other's approval, particularly if vital interests were at stake.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, the regional environment in the immediate aftermath of the First Gulf War necessitated preserving their ties in order to enhance their regional position and to mitigate their security concerns. Indeed, two of the most salient factors that ensured the longevity of the Syrian-Iranian alliance during 1988-90 were the resurgence of Iraqi power and influence throughout the Middle East and the institutionalization of the pro-Iraqi Arab alliance, which had gradually emerged during the 1980's through the formal creation of the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) in February 1989.

As early as 1985, one Middle East scholar had predicted, "Even if the Iran-Iraq war were to end, so long as the present leadership remains in power in Iraq, Syria and Iran will in all likelihood cooperate to keep its influence in check."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, not only did the Iraqi Ba'thi regime survive the eight-year war, but its massive military expansion program through foreign assistance had moreover enabled it to repulse Iranian offensives for six consecutive years and to regain the upper hand in the closing months of the conflict, thereby bolstering its power and prestige in the Arab world. By 1988, Iraq's well-equipped and battle-hardened army constituted one of the five largest military establishments in the entire world. In addition to its military might, Iran's weakness and Syria's isolation also magnified Iraq's power in political terms and made it the prime contender for leadership of the Arab world. The regional situation instilled renewed confidence in Saddam Hussein, who felt flush with a sense of victory over Khomeini's Iran and now had a free hand to pursue an activist foreign policy and strike at his foes, most notably Assad's Syria.<sup>3</sup>

During the twenty-four months prior to the Kuwait crisis, Iraq demonstrated its clear intent to play a pivotal role in the Arab world by providing military aid to Mauritania in its conflict with Senegal, encouraging the unification between the two Yemens, backing the Sudanese Islamist regime's struggle against rebels in the south and becoming more outspoken and confrontational with regard to

issues relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>4</sup> However, from the standpoint of Syria and Iran, two developments in the winter of 1988-89 reinforced their determination to continue their liaison in order to respond to Iraq's growing assertiveness. In Lebanon, following the expiry of Amin Gemayel's term as president, the ensuing deadlock over his succession sparked a major political crisis, prompting Armed Forces Commander General Michel Aoun to step into the political vacuum and challenge Syrian hegemony in Lebanon. The confrontation between Syria and Christian Lebanese forces loyal to Aoun presented Baghdad with an irresistible opportunity to punish Damascus, in its very own backyard, for pursuing pro-Iranian policies during the Gulf conflict. As early as the autumn of 1988, Iraq began arms deliveries to anti-Syrian forces in Lebanon.<sup>5</sup> By 1989, as the conflict between Assad and Aoun escalated, Baghdad used every available opportunity to thwart Damascus' efforts to oust Aoun and regain control of the situation. Substantial quantities of weapons were sent to Aoun loyalists via Egypt and Jordan and, on the diplomatic front, the Iraqis tried to rally Arab support against the Syrian military presence in Lebanon and to seek condemnation of Assad's actions.<sup>6</sup>

Unable to challenge Iraqi power effectively in the Persian Gulf any longer, Iran had turned inward after the ceasefire to focus on domestic reconstruction and revive its energies. Nonetheless, it closely coordinated its policies in Lebanon with Syria to restore unity among the ranks of Shi'ite movements such as Hezbollah and Amal and mobilize them as part of a broad-based, pro-Syrian coalition that eventually prevailed over Aoun's supporters in the latter part of 1989. Besides Iraq's meddling in Lebanon, from the Iranian and Syrian perspective, another worrisome development only six months after the termination of hostilities in the Gulf was the formation of an Arab alliance, the ACC, composed of Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and North Yemen. In essence, the ACC formalized the main Arab axis that had gradually emerged during the 1980's aimed at containing Syrian-Iranian power in the region. The ACC was undoubtedly the dominant Arab political configuration by this stage. Not only did this new alliance further marginalize Syria and Iran, but it also caused deep consternation among some of Iraq's traditional Arab backers, such as Saudi Arabia, which rushed to conclude a non-aggression pact with Saddam Hussein in March 1989.<sup>7</sup> Syria was now the only key Arab state to be left out of the three existing alignments in the Arab world - the ACC, GCC and AMU.<sup>8</sup> Damascus' status as an outcast in Arab politics, coupled with the gradual cooling of Syrian-Soviet relations, reinforced the logic of alliance with Iran, which provided valuable assistance to its Syrian partner to impede Iraqi interference in Lebanon. Moreover, Syrian-Iranian cooperation against Aoun bore fruit that same year.<sup>9</sup>

Although Iran was displeased by Syria's participation in the Saudi-sponsored Taif Accords in October 1989, which restricted Iranian access to Lebanon, and by the Syrian-Egyptian rapprochement during the winter of 1989-90, no major shifts occurred in their bilateral relationship.<sup>10</sup> Saddam Hussein's growing boldness and hubris had begun to cause varying degrees of concern among some of his Arab supporters, consequently increasing, with the passage of time, Syria's room for political maneuvering.<sup>11</sup> As Damascus mended fences with Riyadh and Cairo in the year prior to the Kuwait crisis, the clerical regime in Iran could not emulate its Arab ally since it did not have diplomatic relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The stark reality was that Tehran could not find a

viable alternative to its alliance with Damascus even if wanted to, since most Arab governments had severed links with the Islamic Republic during the 1980's.<sup>12</sup>

The onset of the Kuwait crisis changed the entire political equation in the Middle East overnight and presented Syria and Iran with opportunities to capitalize on the new situation and recoup their position. For Assad, his Ba'thi rival's invasion and occupation of another Arab country vindicated his previous policy of aiding Iran during the eight-year war.<sup>13</sup> With the marked improvement in Syrian capability to control the situation in Lebanon, he subsequently opted to join the international coalition against Iraq, judging that it would be more advantageous in order to neutralize Saddam Hussein and concomitantly extract concessions from the Gulf Arabs and the United States. Iran, now under the Khamene'i-Rafsanjani leadership, was still weak militarily and decided to stay clear of the fray. However, its decision to remain neutral did not mean that it intended to be an idle bystander. Far from it, Tehran believed that, by mediating between the two sides, it could gain leverage over them and exploit subsequent events. In fact, its ability in the initial phase of the crisis to thaw relations with Baghdad, by breaking the two-year deadlock in the peace negotiations and obtaining significant concessions from its foe, alarmed the anti-Iraq camp, prompting Assad to undertake his first state visit to Iran since the 1979 Revolution in September 1990 to seek clarification and gain assurances that Iran would not side with Iraq in the event of war. Again, some analysts predicted the demise of the Syrian-Iranian alliance. Although they adopted divergent positions in this regard, the Kuwait crisis did not sound the death knell of the partnership. In fact, the two allies took a further step in institutionalizing their bilateral relationship in November 1990 through the creation of the Syrian-Iranian Higher Cooperation Committee, chaired by their vice-presidents and foreign ministers. The primary purpose of this body was to meet at regular intervals to hold consultations and strengthen their cooperative links.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the crisis, Iran abided by the UN-imposed embargo on Iraq and maintained its neutrality. The fateful events of 1990-91 divided the Arab world. Iraq's annexation of Kuwait, and the subsequent war that pitted Arabs directly against one another, dealt a significant blow to Arab nationalism and to lingering notions of pan-Arab solidarity.<sup>15</sup> Such developments, coupled with the GCC's preference for a Western rather than an Arab military presence in the postwar Gulf security arrangement, made Assad's policy of perpetuating his alliance with non-Arab Iran seem acceptable in Arab political circles in view of the new regional environment of the 1990's, in stark contrast to the previous decade when backing a non-Arab actor against an Arab one was considered heresy in mainstream Arab politics.

Although the Syrian-Iranian alliance experienced a brief hiccup in the immediate aftermath of the Second Gulf War when Iran was deeply alarmed by the prospect of a permanent Egyptian and Syrian troop deployment in the Persian Gulf, tensions rapidly receded once it became apparent that the GCC states preferred a continued US military presence in the area instead. In general, the conflict and its outcome represented a mixed blessing for the Syrian-Iranian axis. Both Damascus and Tehran took advantage of Iraq's aggression to mend fences with key Arab and Western governments and to break out of their regional and international isolation. They also derived

considerable satisfaction from the fact that Saddam Hussein's military machine was cut down to size and that his regime became politically isolated during the remainder of the 1990's. The war reinforced the Syrian and Iranian arguments that Ba'thi Iraq had been a revisionist power all along, and had been the aggressor in both Gulf conflicts. In spite of Iraq's removal from the immediate picture and the Bush administration's promise to craft an Arab-Israeli peace, the high-profile presence of US forces in the Gulf region and the subsequent failure of the incoming Clinton administration to break the impasse in the Syrian-Israeli track of the peace process dashed expectations in Damascus and Tehran that they could truly benefit from the emerging "New World Order." Assad himself later lamented that the "main winners have been the Arabs' enemies," cautioning that the new environment was detrimental to Arab and Syrian interests.<sup>16</sup>

The passing of the bipolar international system meant that Washington now enjoyed a virtually unassailable position in the Middle East - both in the Persian Gulf and in the Arab-Israeli theater. In the Gulf, it was free to establish a "Pax Americana" by isolating Iraq and Iran, maintaining high force levels in the area and transferring billions of dollars worth of military equipment to the GCC states. In the Levant, Washington failed to end the Arab-Israeli conflict through resolution of the outstanding issues, including the return of the Golan Heights to Syria. In spite of the conclusion of the 1994 Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty, substantive progress on the Syrian and even the Palestinian tracks of the peace process remained elusive. During its first term in office, the Clinton administration went to considerable lengths to try to prise Syria and Iran apart by implementing its "Dual Containment" policy in the Gulf, and also by dispatching Secretary of State Warren Christopher to Damascus more than 20 times between 1993 and 1997 in an attempt to persuade Assad to distance himself from Iran and to conclude a peace accord with Israel.

Overall, Washington's pro-Israeli slant in the Arab-Israeli negotiations, its support for the emergence of a Turkish-Israeli alliance after 1996 to isolate Iran and cow Syria into submission and its willingness to exploit Iran-Gulf Arab differences in order to justify its military presence and massive arms sales to its regional allies reinvigorated and gave more impetus to Syrian-Iranian cooperation in the post-Cold War era. Throughout the 1990's, Ba'thi Syria and Islamist Iran continued to collaborate and assist one another through various means in political and military affairs. On several occasions, Syria mediated between Iran and the Gulf states over differences that arose, most notably, in the dispute with the UAE over Abu Musa and the Tunb islands after 1992, and in the row with Bahrain in 1995.<sup>17</sup> As in the past, Damascus' strategy was to try to defuse Arab-Iranian tensions in the Gulf, and to prevent the US from exploiting volatile conditions to advance its own agenda. From Tehran's standpoint, Syrian intercession and political mediation was greatly preferable to further Western intervention.<sup>18</sup>

In a similar vein, both Iran and Hezbollah coordinated their moves with Syria in the early 1990's to restore stability and order in Lebanon, resolve the Western hostage issue and also ensure that Israel paid a price for its continued occupation of the self-declared security zone. Hezbollah succeeded in transforming itself into a viable political party in its own right by modifying its political platform and conforming to the realities on the ground. By toning down its Islamist rhetoric and

recognizing the sectarian diversity of the country, it demonstrated its ability to operate within Lebanon's secular framework after 1992.<sup>19</sup> In parallel, with Syrian and Iranian backing, Hezbollah's increasingly effective guerrilla campaign against the IDF and SLA throughout the 1990's finally prompted Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to announce that Israeli forces would be pulled out of southern Lebanon by July 2000. However, what was supposed to be an orderly, phased withdrawal over a two-month period turned into a rout in mid-May, as the SLA collapsed and the IDF hastily withdrew within a matter of days by May 24, 2000. Lebanese resistance with Syrian-Iranian collaboration spanning many years had finally borne fruit. It was the first time that Israel had given up territory and withdrawn to its international frontiers without any prior political agreement.

Since Iran and Syria did not have reliable suppliers for modern weaponry during the 1980's, with the United States cutting off the flow of arms to Iran after the 1979 Revolution and Gorbachev scaling back significantly on military assistance to Assad after ascending to power, the two allies tried to diversify their sources for military hardware and develop indigenous arms industries. Unable to procure high-tech weaponry from the US or Western Europe, during the 1990's the two relied primarily on the Russian Federation, Ukraine, China and North Korea for arms. Aside from purchasing modern weaponry, Syria and Iran enlisted the support of these states to build arms factories in order to gain the necessary expertise to upgrade their weapons and develop new ones. In view of the major impact that surface-to-surface missiles had in the two Gulf conflicts, Iran and Syria focused particularly on acquiring the necessary technology and know-how to develop their own ballistic missile capability. Besides buying missiles from Russia, China and North Korea, they sought their assistance to design new missiles. It is believed that as early as September 1991, during a visit to Tehran by Syrian Chief of Staff Hikmat Shihabi, a secret agreement was concluded for joint production of surface-to-surface missiles.<sup>20</sup> Reportedly, the two allies collaborated in developing a cruise missile, while Iran and North Korea participated in establishing production facilities for the manufacture of a missile similar to the Soviet-model Scud in Aleppo and Hama.<sup>21</sup> The primary motive for such programs seems to have been to develop their own deterrent capability, in light of Iraq's willingness to use non-conventional weapons in the past two wars and Israel's overwhelming military superiority. Joint and independent development of ballistic missiles and possibly other non-conventional weapons were intended to diversify their capabilities and correct what Tehran and Damascus perceived as the major military imbalance in the region favoring their adversaries.

On the regional and international level, both Tehran and Damascus considered the continuation of their partnership as a useful means to maximize their autonomy, keep their local adversaries in check, dilute foreign - particularly American - power and influence in the Middle East and also assert themselves within their respective spheres of influence. While Syria enjoyed greater room for maneuver in the regional and Arab state system when compared to Iran, it also recognized the limits of the revived "Arab Triangle" - its alignment with Egypt and Saudi Arabia - in the post-Cold War era. Both of these Arab countries remained close political allies of the United States and were heavily dependent on it for their military and security requirements. Due to their reliance on American goodwill, Damascus was well aware that it could not effectively utilize its channels with

Cairo and Riyadh to persuade Washington to modify its policies in the Arab-Israeli peace process in order to take more account of Syrian interests and concerns.<sup>22</sup> Hence, the alliance with Iran - a country that had the capability to neutralize Iraqi power and wield considerable influence in the Gulf and Lebanon - remained one of Syria's primary trump cards in the diplomatic tug-of-war to attain its objectives.

In terms of alliance theory and lessons one can draw from the Syrian-Iranian case, one has to be extremely careful about making empirical generalizations and trying to apply the specific findings to other cases. Although alliances do display some common characteristics, each alliance in international politics is unique in its own right. Nevertheless, case studies and close surveys of alliances throughout various periods in international history enable us to understand alliances better and lead to the enrichment of the growing body of knowledge on alliance theory. With regard to the Syrian-Iranian alliance, the evidence presented in this thesis demonstrates that a compact alignment between two middle powers that is buttressed by geography, common political and security concerns and complementary interests and which is also defensive in nature and capable of setting limited, attainable objectives can play a major role in shaping events in a specific region for long periods and spoiling the designs of the Great Powers. Furthermore, in a turbulent region where threats may emerge and recede rapidly, it is vital for the alliance partners to possess the ability to engage in continuous consultations in order to ensure that they harmonize their policies and cooperate to meet the existing challenges, and modify them once their common objectives have been attained. In the case of the Damascus-Tehran nexus, dangers posed by Iraqi, Israeli and US policies in the Middle East between 1979 and 1989 resulted in the need to overcome some ideological incompatibilities and conflicting visions to consolidate the alliance and thwart their enemies.

In conclusion, it is worth mentioning once more that the Syrian-Iranian alliance was shaped to varying degrees by the experiences and geography of the two states. However, the role and impact of ideology and the worldviews of their political elites should not be underestimated. Their leaders share certain perceptions and their secular and fundamentalist ideologies overlap in certain respects. While Iran has tried to use its brand of revolutionary Islam to transcend nationalism, create Muslim unity in the region by overcoming Arab-Iranian political cleavages and demonstrate its solidarity through active participation in the Arab-Israeli struggle, Syria has striven to overcome the political fragmentation of the Arab world by acting as a vehicle for Arab unity, since it considers itself as the birthplace and heartland of Arabism. Hafez Assad, Ruhollah Khomeini and their successors have viewed the region as a strategic whole and regarded their alliance as a vital tool to further Arab-Islamic interests and increase regional autonomy by diminishing foreign penetration of the Middle East. As a result, both countries have put long-term interests ahead of short-term gains to advance their common agenda over the years. It is noteworthy that the US has very little leverage over them today, and they have both staved off isolation in the post-Cold War era. Although they have not always been successful in steering events in a desirable direction in the Middle East, their potential to thwart the ambitions of other actors such as Iraq, Israel and the United States cannot be denied. In this respect, the achievements of the Syrian-Iranian alliance during the past two decades have



been quite remarkable. Irrespective of how much longer this partnership endures, it has left its stamp on modern Middle Eastern politics.

#### ENDNOTES

1. See also Hussein J. Agha and Ahmad S. Khalidi, *Syria and Iran: Rivalry and Cooperation*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 1995, pp. 31, and 119-120.
2. Shireen T. Hunter, "Syrian-Iranian Relations: An Alliance of Convenience or More?," *Middle East Insight*, June/July 1985, p. 34.
3. *The Middle East*, November 1988, p. 11.
4. Joe Stork and Ann Lesch, "Background to the Crisis: Why War?," in *The Persian Gulf War: Views from the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Herbert H. Blumberg and Christopher C. French (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1994), p. 21. It is interesting to note that during this period joint Jordanian-Iraqi military exercises were held by their air forces in Jordan for the very first time, near Israel and Syria. Saddam Hussein also denounced Israel on a number of occasions, and in April 1990 promised Yasser Arafat that Iraq would confront Israel in order to liberate Jerusalem. See Amatzia Baram, "Calculation and Miscalculation in Baghdad," in *International Perspectives on the Gulf Conflict 1990-91*, ed. Alex Danchev and Dan Keohane (Houndmills, Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1994), p. 26.
5. For early accounts of Iraqi political interference and arms shipments to anti-Syrian forces in Lebanon, see *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 19, and October 11, 1988, and *The Independent*, September 27, and October 22, 1988.
6. See *The Washington Post*, May 26 and July 9, 1989, and *The International Herald Tribune*, June 8, 1989.
7. For a good analysis of the ACC, see Curtis R. Ryan, "Jordan and the Rise and Fall of the Arab Cooperation Council." *Middle East Journal*, Volume 52, No. 3, Summer 1998, pp. 386-401.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 391.
9. See also, Agha and Khalidi, pp. 26-27.
10. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 104-105.
11. For an excellent overview of the regional situation and Iraqi policies during 1988-90, see Shahram Chubin, "Regional Politics and the Conflict," in *International Perspectives on the Gulf Conflict 1990-91*, ed. Alex Danchev and Dan Keohane (Houndmills, Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1994), pp. 1-22.
12. Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, pp. 45-46.
13. Agha and Khalidi, p. 30.
14. *Middle East International*, November 9, 1990.
15. Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, p. 105. Also see Mohammed Hassanien Heikal, *The Illusion of Triumph*, complete information???
16. Raymond A. Hinnebusch, "Egypt, Syria and the Arab State System in the New World Order," in *The Middle East in the New World Order*, ed. Haifaa A. Jawad (London: Macmillan Press, 1994), p. 178.

17. See Agha and Khalidi, pp. 73 and 86.

18. Ibid., p. 87.

19. Agha and Khalidi, pp. 78-79.

20. *Middle East Contemporary Survey 1991*, p. 684. For more details on the Syrian and Iranian missile programs see Kenneth R. Timmerman, *Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Cases of Iran, Syria, and Libya*, A Simon Wiesenthal Center Special Report, Los Angeles, California, 1992.

21. *The Times*, November 12, 1993, and Agha & Khalidi, p. 106.

22. See also Hinnebusch, p. 177.

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Ambassador Ahmad Mirfenderski (Iranian Foreign Minister), Paris, December 1994.

Mr. Abolhassan Bani-Sadr (President of the Islamic Republic of Iran), Versailles, December 1994.

Ambassador Richard Murphy (US Assistant Secretary of State for Near East and South Asia), London, November 1995.

Ambassador Ardeshir Zahedi (Iranian Foreign Minister), Montreux, November 2000.

NOTE: A number of confidential interviews were also conducted between 1993-2000 in North America, Europe, and the Middle East.