

# Brothers Indeed: Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance Revisited<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *It is universally acknowledged that while students of International Relations have probed deeply into alliance theory in the past half century, current literature in this field can hardly explain the informal mechanism for Syria-Iran Security Cooperation. To unravel the puzzle, this paper proposes a new hypothesis: Quasi-alliance. Based on an empirical study of Syria-Iran relations in the past three decades, it reveals that Quasi-alliance is a unique mode for security cooperation in international arena paralleling with formal alliance, and its security arrangement has unique logic, dynamics, mode of management and attributes. In the new framework of analysis, this paper considers the fundamental characteristics of Quasi-alliance formation, management, efficacy and prospect by focusing on the empirical study of the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance from 1979 to 2009. The bilateral Quasi-alliance practice has undergone three stages of combating Iraqi aggression in the 1980s, curbing the Israel-Turkey Axis in 1990s and balancing the US-Israel coalition in the 21st century.*

**Key Words:** *Syria-Iran Relations; Alliance Theory; Quasi-alliance Theory; Quasi-alliance Diplomacy; International Relations Theory*

Ever since Iranian Revolution in 1979, Syria and Iran have maintained an all-round cooperation in economy, politics, security and culture. Particularly in the field of security, the two sides have formed a long-term tacit agreement with several important channels for consultation. The top leaders of the two countries afford each other sympathy and support on key regional security issues, ranging from the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the Lebanon War (1982 and 2006), the Gulf War (1991), the Iraq War (2003), Iranian Nuclear Crisis (since 2003) and the Gaza War (2008).

## I. Syria-Iran Relations: A Quasi-alliance Hypothesis

Current literature on Syria-Iran relations suggests that, owing to their close-knit security cooperation, Syria and Iran are undisputable military alliance

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like US-Japan alliance.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, there is no denying the fact that Syria and Iran have never signed a formal military treaty so far, and their security cooperation is not based on formal military pact, but on a series of informal security arrangement. As Charles W. Kegley and Eugene R. Wittkopf argue, “alliances usually form when two or more states face a common security threat. They are formal agreements among states to coordinate their behavior.”<sup>4</sup> Hence, Syria-Iran relations, undoubtedly, cannot meet the condition of a “formal alliance”.

This paper proposes a hypothesis of “Quasi-alliance”, and argues that in international security cooperation, regimes rely not only on formal alliances, but also sometimes on informal security arrangement---Quasi-alliance, which is hereby defined as permanent or *ad hoc* informal security cooperation arrangement, based not on formal collective defense pacts, but on tacit agreements between two or among more international regimes. Quasi-alliances boast six features. First, in terms of size, there exist both bilateral and multilateral Quasi-alliances; second, Quasi-alliances consist of both sovereign states and non-sovereign actors, such as Hamas and Hezbollah; third, the formation of a Quasi-alliance hinges on the establishment of tacit agreement between and among the elites of different states; fourth, Quasi-alliance can be either tacit or *ad hoc*, or both; fifth, the management of Quasi-alliance relies on mutual expectation based on communiqués, joint declarations, memoranda, treaties of friendship and cooperation, declarations on the press conference, domestic laws (such as *Taiwan Relations Act*) or even UN resolutions, instead of military treaties, and finally, Quasi-alliances are, by nature, military and security cooperations targeting a third party explicitly or implicitly, not an economic, social or cultural one. These features have differentiated “Quasi-alliance” from “formal alliance” (See table 1).

Table 1: Alliance and Quasi-alliance: Similarities and Differences<sup>5</sup>

	Alliance	Quasi-alliance
History	As early as the founding of sovereign states	As early as the founding of sovereign states
Targeting	Balancing or bandwagoning	Balancing or bandwagoning
Purpose for cooperation	To win the war of to deter the enemy	To win the war of to deter the enemy
Agreement	Formal military pact	Informal security arrangement
Member Relations	Interdependent in security Cooperation	Relatively independent in Security cooperation

<sup>3</sup> See Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: Tauris Academic, 2006); Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Charles W. Kegley Jr. and Eugene R. Wittkopf, *World Politics: Trend and Transformation* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), p. 534.

<sup>5</sup> Degang Sun, *Multi-facet Balancing and A Quasi-alliance Theory* (Beijing: Shishi Publishing House, 2007), p. 75.

Members	Sovereign states	Sovereign states or non-sovereign actors
Power distribution	Symmetrical or asymmetrical	Symmetrical or asymmetrical
Principle on cooperation	stipulated by mutual defense treaties	Mutual expectation
Sovereignty Transferring	More	Less
Form of cooperation	Static	Dynamic

Due to the complex inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflicts in the Middle East, political leaders are frequently forced to seek external support for security. Alliance is probably more reliable, but it tends to entrap the allied actors and provoke potential enemies.<sup>6</sup> Apart from alliance and neutrality, those leaders may explore a third way, i.e. quasi-alliance to compromise sovereignty and security interests, such as US-Saudi, US-Israel and US-Kuwait Quasi-alliances respectively. The former Soviet Union established Quasi-alliance with Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Yemen respectively too. In terms of the local powers themselves, Israel built a Quasi-alliance with Turkey in the 1990s, but a typical regional Quasi-alliance between the lesser powers in the Middle East is the Tehran- Damascus Axis. What are the dynamics of the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance? How is it managed? How efficient and effective is it? What are its major features? What direction is it oriented towards? The paper aims at disclosing the formation, management, efficacy and prospect of the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance.

## II. Dynamics of Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance Formation

The dynamics of the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance formation are numerous and multi-fold, which can be generally categorized into two different profiles.

First, judging by the system profile, the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance is driven by a balance of power posture in the Middle East. Due to the contradictions between the Soviet Union and the US, and between Arab states, Israel, Turkey and Iran, the Middle East was basically in a state of anarchy in the past three decades, i.e. a state of Hobessian Jungle.<sup>7</sup> From 1979 to 2009, there were always two conflicting blocs in the Middle East. In the 1980s, the two conflicting blocs were the Syria-Iran-Libya Quasi-alliance and Iraq-Saudi-Jordan Quasi-alliance, and they were rivaling with each other from 1979 to 1989; in the 1990s, the two conflicting blocs were the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance and Israel-Turkey Quasi-alliance, and they competed

<sup>6</sup> Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 1984, p. 461.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 254-255.



with each other for regional leadership; in the 21st century, the two conflicting blocs have shifted to Iran-Syria-Hamas-Hezbollah Quasi-alliance, which is habitually called radical coalition or HISH Group by Israel and the West, and Israel-US Quasi-alliance, which attempts to carry forward western value and political system in the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> The above-mentioned three stages of conflicting blocs are similar to ancient Chinese alliance strategies of *hezong* (Vertical alliance) and *Lianheng* (Horizontal alliance), although they were basically different in scope of cooperation. In the past three decades, the looming bipolar regional structure in the Middle East was always the major impetus for the formation of Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance.

Second, viewed from the inter-state level, the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance is motivated by their common security interests. Syria boasts a secular Islamic system, while Iran enjoys a theocratic Islamic system, but their ideological divergence has never been a barrier to their strategic and security cooperation. As early as January 16, 1979 when the Shah left Iran, Syria began to pursue the possibility to cooperate with it; on January 26, Ruhollah Khomeini, hailed by over two million demonstrators, came to the supreme power with the household slogan of "Not to the east, not west, as long as the Islamic".<sup>9</sup> The new government of Iran was an isolated island in the Middle East, opposed by various Sunni states ranging from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, North Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, and the West was also seriously anxious about Iranian exports of radical ideology. Meanwhile, the new Iranian government received great moral and political support from Libya and South Yemen, but it was Syria that offered Iran substantial military and political assistance.<sup>10</sup> Despite the fact that Iranian neighboring countries were all suspicious and even fearful of the new regime, the Syrian government recognized the new administration, which was the second in the world and the first in the Arab states. Moreover, in 1980, Iraq, with a tacit agreement with the West and Arab Gulf states, shelled Iranian borders and even attacked Iranian densely populated cities, and Syria resolutely sided with Iran and supported it with invaluable political, military and moral assistance. It was obvious that Syria was bearing great political and moral pressure in establishing a Quasi-alliance with Iran facing the common threat of Saddam Hussein regime. For instance, Syria was excluded from the ACC jointly formed by Egypt, North Yemen, Jordan and Iraq.<sup>11</sup> On June 27, 1982, the National Congress of the Iraqi Ba'th Party was held, during

<sup>8</sup> Barry Rubin, "Why Syria Matters," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2006, p. 21.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Mansfield, *A History of the Middle East* (London: Viking-Penguin, 1991), p. 328; Henry Precht, "The Iranian Revolution: An Oral History with Henry Precht, Then State Department Desk Officer," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 1, 2004, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds., *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), p. 297.

<sup>11</sup> Robert O. Freedman, *The Middle East after Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), p. 279; p. 288.

which Syria was harshly criticized of sabotaging Baghdad Summit of Arab Nations, for Syrian support of Iran had weakened Iraqi capability to launch a holy war against Israel.<sup>12</sup> At the threshold of the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq suppressed an abortive coup against Saddam Hussein, who then forced all pro-Syria figures to resign, and severed diplomatic relations with Syria. For further revenge, Saddam went to great lengths to finance the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the opposition force against Syrian President Hafiz Assad.<sup>13</sup>

Iraq-Syria tit-for-tat strategies finally gave birth to the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance. Threatened by both Israel and Iraq, Syria found Iran a sole important and reliable force to balance common enemies. For example, Iran provided Hezbollah with great financial and personnel support, so that Southern Lebanon became an essential buffer zone between Israel and Syria. In return, in supporting the Iranian War against Iraq, Syria transferred arms from the former Soviet Union to Tehran and covertly supported the Iraqi Kurd's independence movement.<sup>14</sup> Syria also attempted to weaken Saddam Hussein regime economically. Before Iran-Iraq War, over 300 thousand barrels of Iraqi oil were exported to the Mediterranean coast via Syria daily. In 1982, Syria cut off Iraqi oil pipeline, causing at least 17 million dollars' damages per day to Iraq. President Assad of Syria even dispatched troops to Syria-Jordan border, forcing Iraq to do prepare a war on the west line too.<sup>15</sup>

As compensation, Iran not only offered security guarantee to Syria, but also provided a huge amount of energy assistance. On May 17, 1983, Israel planned to sign a security agreement with Lebanon, which was jointly opposed by Syria and Iran; in May 1986, Israel was reportedly planning to attack Syria, and Iran openly warned and criticized Israeli aggression and promised to stand by Syria; in the Autumn of 1986, when the international community universally charged Syria as a terrorist-supporter, Iran declared that its position to support the Assad administration remained unchanged.<sup>16</sup> What's more, in the 1980s, Iran provided Syria with 20 thousand barrels of oil as grant and 100 thousand barrels of oil with favorable price per day.<sup>17</sup> Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance became an important pillar of security to the two sides when Iraq, supported by a great number of Arab states and the West, launched a series of hostile offenses. After the Gulf War in 1991, the Iraqi force was generally destroyed with its motivation and its capability to harm Syria and Iran weakened. However, due to the Israel-Turkey Quasi-alliance

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<sup>12</sup> Eberhard Kienle, *Ba'th v. Ba'th: The Conflict Between Syria and Iraq 1968-1989* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1990), p. 159.

<sup>13</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran*, p. 89; p. 92.

<sup>14</sup> Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Change* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p.384.

<sup>15</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran*, p. 95.

<sup>16</sup> S. Chubin and C. Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1988), p. 184.

<sup>17</sup> Robert O. Freedman, *The Middle East from the Iran-Contra Affair to the Intifada* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1991), p. 308.



formation in the 1990s, and due to the Israel-US Quasi-alliance consolidation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Syria and Iran were potential targets to be handled. In the following years, the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance, far from being undermined, was enhanced in facing the increasingly serious common threat.

To sum up, there are two fundamental dynamics for the formation of the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance, i.e. the regional bipolar power structure and the common security interest, the former being at the system level while the latter is at the inter-state level.

### III. Management of Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance

Based on the preliminary research above, a conclusion could be drawn that the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance is driven by the common security interest within the background of bipolar system in the Middle East, instead of common values, religious beliefs or elites' congeniality. The Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance is by nature a marriage of convenience, but how is it managed? What are the major means for the two sides to coordinate and cooperate so that the political leaders could be confident with their informal security arrangement? Generally speaking, there are three channels through which Iran and Syria managed their Quasi-alliance relations.

The first channel is mutual assistance. Quasi-alliance members form a security bloc partly because they have their respective exchangeable assets, so that all parties can meet their security need with the help of the others. For instance, in the 1990s, Israel and Turkey established a Quasi-alliance to balance the Syria-Iran Axis. On November 13, 1993, i.e. two months after Israeli Prime Minister Rabin and Palestinian Authorities' Leader Arafat had a historical meeting at the White House, Hikmet Cetin, the Turkish Prime Minister paid a visit to Israel for the first time throughout history.<sup>18</sup> Since then, Israel-Turkey relations achieved an unprecedented development, and their bilateral exchanges of visits were very remarkable. On February 23, 1996, encouraged by the US, the two sides declared their intention to sign an agreement on military training, stipulating that Israel and Turkey would participate in joint military exercises, and open their respective navy bases to the other side, and the two countries' airplanes could fly over each other's air space.<sup>19</sup> Partly due to the establishment of the Israel-Turkey Axis, Turkey worsened its relations with both Syria and Iran, two major Islamic powers in the region. In 1997, the Turkish National Security Committee reportedly discovered some brochures issued by Iran titled *Spreading Political Islam 1997*, which aimed at arousing Turkish people's awareness of revolution, and which

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<sup>18</sup> Wolfango Piccoli, *Alliance Theory: The Case of Turkey and Israel* (Copenhagen: Copenhagen Peace Research Institute, 1999), p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

understandably shocked the Turkish government and the media.<sup>20</sup> In order to support Iran, Syria was said to continue to harbor Aabudullah Ocalan, the leader of PKK, in the mid 1990s, and continue to finance and provide training centers for PKK guerillas abroad. During its negotiations with Turkey, Syria refused to compromise on the distribution of water resources on the Euphrates River.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the 1990s, Syria and Iran came to assist each other when either side was threatened by Israel or Turkey.

After the 9/11 attack, the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance still hinges on mutual assistance. For example, on February 14, 2005, former Lebanese Prime Minister Fahd Hariri was assassinated and Syrian government was speculated to be behind the terrorist attack.<sup>22</sup> When Syrian Prime Minister Naji al-Oari visited Iran immediately after, Iranian vice President Raza Aref said that, at such a sensitive historical juncture, the two countries should establish a united front to face the common threat and challenge exerted by others. Particularly, Iran was willing to share its experience of countering Western sanction with Syria.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, after the Iranian nuclear crisis worsened, the US government frequently demonized Iran as a Mad Mullah, while the US was called "Great Satan" and Israel "Little Satan" by Iran too.<sup>24</sup>

Apart from security assistance, Syria and Iran offered each other economic and energy assistance. As mentioned above, in the 1980s, Iran provided Syria with a total amount of four hundred million dollars' grant as well as one million barrel oil at favorable price per year.<sup>25</sup>

The second channel is the exchange of visits between the two sides' official leaders. The Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance is enhanced through various exchanges of visits between the two countries. In the first decade after the Iranian revolution, over one million Iranians visited Syria and there were six air flights between the two countries per week, which laid a solid foundation for the official exchanges of visits between them.<sup>26</sup> On January 19, 2006, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian President, paid a two-day visit to Syria and the two countries signed several bilateral agreements. As to the Iranian nuclear issue, Bashar al-Assad, President of Syria reiterated that Syria opposed other countries' pressure on Iran. On January

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<sup>20</sup> Tareq Y. Ismael and Mustafa Aydin, *Turkey's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: A Changing Role in World Politics* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), p. 183.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Olson, *Turkey's Relations with Iran, Syria, Israel and Russia, 1991-2000: The Kurdish and Islamist Questions* (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2001), p. 105.

<sup>22</sup> Jeremy Jones, *Negotiating Change: The New Politics of the Middle East* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), p. 89.

<sup>23</sup> Roger Howard, *Iran Oil: The New Middle East Challenge to America* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 144.

<sup>24</sup> See William O. Beeman, *The "Great Satan" vs. the "Mad Mullahs": How the United States and Iran Demonize Each Other* (London: Praeger, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran*, p. 31; pp. 99-100.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p.101.



21<sup>st</sup>, 2006, the two sides signed a joint declaration, through which Iran urged that Israel return the occupied land to Syria and Syria placed emphasis on the universal legitimate right of all sovereign countries to use nuclear technology for peaceful purpose, including Iran.<sup>27</sup> These are just the tip of the iceberg in the Syria-Iran frequent exchanges of visits (see table 2).

**Table 2: Major Exchange of Visits between Syrian and Iranian Leaders (1980-1996)<sup>28</sup>**

Date	Visitors	Destination	Purposes of Visit
November 1980	Hojjatolislam Rafsanjani	Syria	Seeking Syrian support in Iran-Iraq War
March 1982	Vice President Khaddam of Syria	Iran	The two countries signed a ten-year trade pact
January 1983	Iranian Foreign Minister	Syria	Foreign Ministers of Iran, Syria and Libya issued a joint communiqué after the meeting stating that they would stand by Iran
March 1983	Syrian Minister of Oil and Commerce	Iran	Unknown
April 1983	Foreign Minister Velayati of Iran	Syria	Iran offered Syria one million tons of oil on top of the agreed five million target as a grant
April 1984	Syrian Minister of Oil	Iran	Unknown
August 4, 1984	Rafiq Doust, Minister of the Revolutionary Guards	Syria	Discussing Syria-Iran cooperation in Lebanon and the scope for broader military ties
September 6, 1984	President Khamenei of Iran	Syria	Unknown
June 28, 1986	Iranian Vice Foreign Minister	Syria	The two countries reiterated that their alliance is "strategic"
January 3, 1989	Syrian Foreign Minister	Iran	Unknown
September 1990	President Assad of Syria	Iran	Presidents Rafsanjani and Assad issued a joint communiqué praising their bilateral alliance
April 30, 1991	President Rafsanjani of Iran	Syria	Rafsanjani persuaded Assad to allow Hezbollah to remain armed
January 3, 1993	Vice President Khaddam of Syria	Iran	Unknown
June 22, 1995	Vice President Khaddam of Syria	Iran	Attending the seventh session of the Iran-Syria Supreme Joint Committee
February 27, 1996	Vice President Habibi of Iran	Syria	Unknown

<sup>27</sup> Degang Sun, "Analysis of Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance", *Arab World Studies*, No. 6, 2006, p. 30.

<sup>28</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran*, pp. 207-222.



The third channel is an informal security agreement. In March 1983, the foreign ministers of Iran, Syria and Libya assembled in Damascus, the capital of Syria, and issued a tri-party declaration that the three countries would “stick together through thick and thin” in Iranian rebellion against Iraq. This declaration laid a sound foundation for the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance. To further combat the Israeli threat, Syria and Iran inked a Strategic Cooperation Treaty in 2004, symbolizing their closer bilateral relations. In June 2006, the two sides’ administration signed another defense pact with limited functions, and the details of the pact are still beyond the public knowledge. In March 2007, another security cooperation agreement was signed which legitimized Iranian export of missiles, facilities and arms to Syria. Iran also promised to train Syrian personnel and enhance bilateral intelligence, energy and economic cooperation.<sup>29</sup> The above-mentioned security agreements are by nature informal, because they were signed by administrative branches, but were avoided being ratified by legislation to become laws. That guaranteed that the two sides could engage in security cooperation without sacrificing too much sovereignty.

#### IV. Attributes of Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance

In accordance with different performances, Quasi-alliance can be generally categorized into two types: cooperative and competitive Quasi-alliance. Here “cooperative” and “competitive” are both relative terms. In the former case, quasi-allies endeavor to provide public goods for the collective, while in the latter case, quasi-allies tend to bargain with each other and strive to privatize the public goods.<sup>30</sup> Obviously, the former tends to consolidate a Quasi-alliance, while the latter tends to undermine the Quasi-alliance. In a broad sense, the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance belongs to the cooperative mode, and their security cooperation is characterized by the following attributes.

First, the Quasi-alliance is covert. As Hans J. Morgenthau points out in his masterpiece *Politics Among Nations*, not all countries throughout history are willing to list the content of their security cooperation in detail and turn it into legal and binding alliance treaties.<sup>31</sup> Syria and Iran security cooperation is mainly in their diplomatic practice which can be observed and sensed in reality, but the principles for cooperation were not in written form. Actually, in propaganda and public information, the two countries have never admitted that they have formal alliances

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<sup>29</sup> United States Institute of Peace, *Syria's Alliance with Iran* (Washington D.C.: USI Peace Briefing, May 2007), p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Degang Sun, “Alliance Diplomacy and the Three-Level Game Mode,” *Journal of International Forum*, No. 6, 2008, p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics among Nations* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 203.



like US-Australia or US-South Korea relations. Instead, Syria and Iran are both proud of their non-alignment policy and sometimes criticize US-led western military alliances publicly, regarding the western alliances as the source of instability and wars in the world. Syria and Iran are “covert brothers instead of a registered couple”.

Second, the Quasi-alliance is stable. In the past three decades, Syria-Iran cooperation features great smoothness. On the one hand, this kind of smooth security cooperation results from their cultural and religious affinity. For instance, the two countries are both Islamic countries and the ruling parties are both Shiite, which is an isolated minority in terms of population and influence in the Sunni-dominated Middle East regions. On the other hand, their Quasi-alliance solidarity originates from common security interests. As Stephen Walt has mentioned, threat is essentially determined by aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power and aggressive intentions.<sup>32</sup> The last three decades have witnessed overwhelming external threats challenging Syria and Iran. The Saddam Hussein regime in the 1980s, Israel and Turkey in 1990s as well as Israel and US after the “911” Attack have all shown their respective strong capability and motivation to do harm to both Syria and Iran, and the Tehran-Damascus Axis has been frequently demonized as the “Axis of Instability” in the Middle East. External threats have stabilized Syria-Iran security cooperation. In the stable security cooperation, cultural and religious affinity is the soft foundation, while common security interest being the hard foundation.

Third, the Quasi-alliance is asymmetrical. There are two-fold meanings of asymmetry in the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance. On the one hand, Iran relies on Syria more than Syria relies on Iran in security field. The fundamental reason lies in that Iran, not Syria is often at the front of confrontation with other regional and global hegemonies, such as Iraq in 1980s, Israel and Turkey in 1990s and the US and Israel in the 21st century, so Iran has been habitually treated with “a stick” rather than with “a carrot”. Syria, compared with Iran, is more moderate and less dangerous, for it is a secular society with no intention to carry forward an extreme ideology like that of Iran. On the other hand, Iran is a senior brother and Syria a junior brother in terms of their comprehensive national power. Judging by population, territory, natural resources, size of army, and navy and air force, Iran ranks the first in the Gulf region.<sup>33</sup> Syria’s population is only one quarter of that in Iran and its territory is but one eighth of Iran.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Syrian hard power and soft power are relatively small in the Middle East. Unlike Iran, Syria has no clear grand strategy in the Caspian Sea, Central Asia, Latin America and East Asia.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 22-25.

<sup>33</sup> Iranian Military Capability,

<http://9link.116.com.cn/globe/540456fd519b961f/yilang/yilangjunduibukexiaoqu>.

<sup>34</sup> Iranian Military Capability, <http://mil.news.sohu.com/20060810/n244729739.shtml>.

Fourth, the Quasi-alliance is both defensive and offensive. Theoretically speaking, all states could be classified into two groups, the offensive powers and defensive powers. The former refer to nations which have strong motive and capacity to conquer other nations and overthrow the international *status quo*, the latter to nations which have less motive or capability to conquer other nations, nor are they ready to overthrow international *status quo*.<sup>35</sup> Yet it is hard to put Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance into the shoes. Syria and Iran have consistently maintained a defense-offense balance in their Quasi-alliance strategies. From one point of view, they are vigilant to external subversion and have to keep a defensive stance particularly after Israeli military exercises in the Mediterranean Sea in November 2008.<sup>36</sup> From another perspective, they never waste any opportunity to subjugate enemies by force if the leaders calculate that it is worth their effort, so they kept an offensive stance during the Lebanon War in 2006 and the Gaza War in 2008-09.

Finally, the Quasi-alliance is limited. In their three-decade-long close-knit security consultation and coordination, neither party has offered the other side a “blank check”, for neither of them is willing to provide unconditional economic support when crises erupt, let alone military support. In other words, political leaders of the two countries are so pragmatic in their diplomacy that they have never dreamed of obtaining “one hundred percent insurance,” should they be involved in crisis. They do not pin a high expectation on the Quasi-alliance not because their quasi-ally’s aid is meaningless, but because neither party is willing to sacrifice their own independence and sovereignty. After all, their Quasi-alliance is a compensation of their respective security strategy, not the replacement of their respective national security strategies.

## V. Efficacy of the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance

Is the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance efficient? Can the two sides meet their need in security? In this part, three cases are chosen to disclose its efficacy.

The first case is the Lebanon War in 2006 which could clearly reveal Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance efficacy. On July 12, 2006, Hezbollah attacked the Israeli Defense Force, killing three soldiers and kidnapping two more. Israel was, consequently, determined to retaliate and launched the Lebanon War. All of a sudden, the conflict escalated and it almost came to the verge of a general war. According to statistics, 1187 Lebanese and 160 Israelis were killed with thousands of civilians injured in the conflict.<sup>37</sup> After the breakout of the war, Syria, Iran, Hezbollah and Southern Iraqi Shiites formed an anti-Israeli coalition, which is habitually called

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<sup>35</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 124.

<sup>36</sup> Mel Frykberg, “Attack on Iran not Ruled out,” *Middle East Journal*, No.394, 2008, p. 30.

<sup>37</sup> Molly Moore and Edward Cody, “Israel Accepts U.N. Deal,” *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2006.



“Shiite Triangle”. Iran sent 500 military officials to train Hezbollah and granted the latter 100 million dollars.<sup>38</sup> The Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance effectively compensated Hezbollah’s military, economic and strategic disadvantage in its rivalry with Israel. Actually the Quasi-alliance was so effective that Zeev Sternhell, an Israeli historian, publicly admitted that, from the Israeli perspective, “the Lebanon War is the least successful throughout Israeli history”.<sup>39</sup>

The second case is the Iranian nuclear issue. Ever since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected President of Iran, Iranian nuclear issue has become a “hot-spot” drawing world-wide attention. US and Israeli officials contended time and again that since Iran boasts rich oil and natural gas reserves, the so-called peaceful use of nuclear energy is nothing but a pretext to develop nuclear weapons. As Donald Rumsfeld, the former US Secretary of Defense put it in late 2003, they (Iranians) don’t need nuclear energy at all, just as they don’t need sand. They are purposeful. Once given an opportunity, they would strive to continue to develop ballistic missiles and even nuclear weapons.<sup>40</sup> Israel strongly opposes Iran to obtain nuclear weapons, because first, it intends to keep its nuclear monopoly in the Middle East unchallenged; second, it wants to maintain a favorable balance of power in the Persian Gulf; third, it strives to prevent nuclear proliferation among radical groups or regimes in the Middle East. During his May 2009 visit to the White House, Netanyahu, Israeli Prime Minister claimed that, by the end of 2009, the US and Israel and the international community would have to make a final decision on the Iranian nuclear issue – they would either accept the reality that Iran is a nuclear power, or take military action.<sup>41</sup> In order to counter the US and Israeli economic embargo, political sanctions, diplomatic isolation and military containment, Iran sought help from Syria, and it turned out to be fairly successful. For example, on February 16, 2005, during his visit to Iran, Prime Minister Naji al-Oari of Syria proposed to build a united front to combat common threats and to meet common challenge.<sup>42</sup>

The third case is the Gaza War in late 2008 and early 2009. For several years, Hamas has been condemned of as being an Iranian puppet, just like Hezbollah has been in Lebanon. It reportedly received at least 25 million dollars from Iran annually.<sup>43</sup> The Israeli government grieved that from 2001 to 2008, Hamas shelled 8 000 rockets, killing 24 Israeli civilians, injuring over 1000, and forcing 240 thousand Israelis to become displaced. On December 27, 2009, Israel launched a war against Hamas as retaliation. After the Gaza War broke out, the Syria-Iran

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<sup>38</sup> Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 88.

<sup>39</sup> Andreas Malm and Shora Esmailian, *Iran on the Brink Rising Workers and Threats of War* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), p. 215.

<sup>40</sup> Bill Gertz, *Treachery: How America’s Friends and Foes Are Secretly Arming Our Enemies* (New York: Crown Forum, 2004), pp. 90-91.

<sup>41</sup> See “Netanyahu and Obama on Collision Course?” *New York Times*, May 17, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Robin Wright and Peter Baker, “US-Syria Tensions Escalate,” *The Washington Post*, February 16, 2005.

<sup>43</sup> “Gaza is the Smoke; Iran is the Fire,” *The USA Today*, January 8, 2009.

Quasi-alliance began to function again, aiming at coming to rescue Hamas. Manouchehr Mottaki, the Iranian Foreign Minister, carried out a series of telephone diplomacy; President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sent 22 special envoys to neighboring countries, appealing to them for supporting Hamas and the Palestinians. He personally proclaimed that Iran would support an anti-Israeli force until Israel perishes one day. Ayatollah Khamenei, the religious leader of Iran emphasized that all that died for the just cause of Palestinians would be martyrs. Partly at the call of the government, thousands of volunteers queued, requesting to go to the Gaza battle.<sup>44</sup> On January 7, 2009, Ali Larijani held talks with Khaled Meshaal, the political leader of Hamas in Damascus. Meshaal sang high praise for Iranian moral and economic support.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, Syria seemed to have provided help too, although the means and scope of its support were basically speculative. In the Gaza War, although Hamas was defeated, it survived a series of Israeli raids, which mainly owed to Iranian and Syrian support.

Judging by the three cases mentioned above, the Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance is of great efficiency and effect. That is not because they have formulated a perfect or highly efficient mechanism, but because they always face common threats and have common interests. Ideally, each of them wants to be independent in strategy, but realistically, each of them has to rely on the other. External settings always force them to get united, or they would be defeated one by one like Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq in history. The relatively high efficacy of the Quasi-alliance implies that Syria and Iran are trustworthy brothers who share much with each other in strategic field, and in the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that the Quasi-alliance will collapse.

## VI. Conclusion

In the field of international security, alliance theory has been intensively and extensively studied. However, up until now, the informal security arrangement, thereby referred to as Quasi-alliance, remains a gray zone, which has been neglected. In the past three decades, Syria and Iran have engaged in broad security cooperation, but they are reluctant to sign a formal mutual defense pact. Their cooperation is based on informal security arrangement, such as joint communiqués and other less formal treaties. The Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance is driven by bipolar system in the Middle East as well as their shared common security interest, such as combating the Iraqi invasion in the 1980s, countering the Israel-Turkey Axis in the 1990s, and balancing the Israel-US hegemony in the 21st century. To manage the Quasi-alliance, the two countries have relied on informal security pacts, exchanges

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<sup>44</sup> "Mideast: Tehran Opts for Moral Support in Gaza War," *Global Information Network*, January 12, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> "As Hamas Continues to Fire Iranian-made Rockets, The Israel Project Begins TV Ad Campaign to Prevent War with Iran," *Targeted News Service*, January 14, 2009.



of top leaders and mutual assistance, and they have maintained cooperative relations throughout the past thirty years. Judging by the Lebanon War in 2006, the Iranian Nuclear Crisis since 2006, and the Gaza War in 2008-09, Syria and Iran have fulfilled their obligations in the security field.

Based on Syria-Iran relations, it can be argued that Quasi-alliances could exhibit functions that formal alliances cannot provide, as the security cooperation in Quasi-alliance is secret, temporary, expedient and flexible. Nevertheless, it does not attempt to argue that Quasi-alliance always excels at alliance building and maintenance. There is no denying that Quasi-alliances inherit compatible disadvantages too. First, the security assurance is so obscure and the security cooperation in Quasi-alliance is so loose that its deterrence is far weaker than in a formal alliance. Some Quasi-alliances are formed only after the emergence of a crisis, which may cause the rivals to misperceive or misjudge each other's intentions. Second, due to the instability and vagueness of the tacit agreement between quasi-allies, policy-makers may choose to "pass the buck" when they find no benefit from the approaching conflict, or they have to go through rounds of negotiations, consultations or even fierce bargaining before they agree to take unanimous actions. Third, quasi-allies often harbor higher expectation than the actual support provided by their security cooperators, so that their unrealistic or divergent needs may cause the loss of credibility of mutual assistance and the erosion of the efficacy of Quasi-alliance. Last but not least, Quasi-alliances, the same as formal alliance, can only reduce, not eliminate, the state of international anarchy. The inherent logic of alliance formation is to reduce one's own freedom of action to restrain the choice of allies' foreign policies. With the higher cost of security cooperation, it can effectively restrict the allies' opportunism. Likewise, the inherent logic of Quasi-alliance formation is to increase one's own freedom in diplomacy to reduce the cost of security cooperation. Yet, it will in return inevitably increase the Quasi-allies' freedom in diplomacy, thus alluring them to take opportunistic action.