

# Syria: Between Negotiations with Israel and the Iranian Axis

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



## Articles & Testimony

- The Syria-Iran alliance predated the rise to power of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Prior to the 1979 Iranian revolution, President Hafiz Assad offered Ayatollah Khomeini sanctuary in Syria. Subsequently, Syria was the first Arab state to recognize the Shiite revolutionary regime in Tehran.
- Increased political pressures, a growing fiscal deficit, rising food prices, and the ongoing depletion of oil reserves have placed Damascus in a precarious situation. According to the IMF, as of Summer 2007, Syria had recovered from five years of weak growth, achieved economic recovery, and it was assessed that the "near-term outlook for growth and inflation is favorable." But the IMF also said that Syria faced a number of economic challenges, which now appear to be having an effect on Damascus.
- The Assad regime is increasingly feeling the pressure of isolation within the Arab system, as it faces an unprecedented backlash from its continued pernicious meddling in Lebanon. With pressures increasing, the Assad regime is now focusing again on its second-tier strategy for ending the UN tribunal and emerging from isolation -- by initiating peace negotiations with Israel.
- The Syrians see bilateral negotiations with Israel as a way to renew contacts with Washington and end international isolation and pressure. Thus, negotiations, even without fruition, entail great benefits to the Syrians. Recognizing this, the Syrians have cynically employed the notion of negotiations with Israel since 2003.
- The view from Washington is decidedly more sober. After years of engaging the Syrians, in 2005 the Bush Administration came to the conclusion that the Assad regime was basically irredeemable. Washington understood it could neither convince the Assad regime of the wisdom of switching sides, nor could it purchase a reformed Syria. In addition, engagement with Damascus necessarily would undermine Washington's allies, further empowering Hezbollah and Iran.
- When Israel announced on May 21, 2008, that it had officially resumed negotiations with Syria in Turkey, not surprisingly, the Assad regime merely pocketed this diplomatic gain, providing no sign that it had any intention to meet Israeli requirements. With the costs for Lebanon so high and the indications so clear that the Syria track will not anytime soon achieve the minimum Israeli definition of success, it does not make sense for Israel to be pushing ahead with negotiations now.

**T**he December 2006 Iraq Study Group (ISG) report pointed to diplomatic engagement with Syria as a prerequisite for stabilizing Iraq. Talking with Syria, it was argued, would also result in less harmful Syrian policies in Lebanon, Palestinian politics, and vis-à-vis Israel. Ultimately, say most proponents of U.S. engagement, the goal is the strategic reorientation of Syria away from Iran.

No doubt, ending Syria's decades-long alliance with Iran would be a positive development for both the U.S. and Israel. For Israel, this split would imply the end of Syrian support for Hizbullah and Hamas, providing an opportunity for peace with Syria and Lebanon. For the U.S., a reorientation of Syria would constitute a significant blow for Iranian regional ambitions and, at a minimum, complicate Tehran's plans for Lebanon and Iraq.

In the abstract, there is little debate about whether a Syrian shift from the radical to the moderate camp would be beneficial. Rather, the question is whether it would be possible to foment this separation and if so, at what cost.<sup>1</sup>

### The Strategic Nature of Iranian-Syrian Relations

It is important to take a dispassionate look at what a peace treaty with Israel would imply for Damascus' strategic relationship with Tehran.

Some Syria analysts describe the Syria-Iran bilateral relationship as a tactical alliance that developed purely in response to the rise to power of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the alliance pre-dated Saddam, and perseveres as perhaps the longest-standing strategic relationship in the region.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, prior to the 1979 Iranian revolution, then President Hafiz Assad offered Ayatollah Khomeini sanctuary in Syria. Subsequently, Syria was the first Arab state to recognize the Shiite revolutionary regime in Tehran.

Today, nearly eight years after Hafiz Assad's son Bashar took power, Syria's relations both with Iran and its Lebanese terrorist proxy, Hizbullah, are even deeper. Tehran's assistance to Damascus extends far beyond its well-documented financial, procurement, and technological help on Syrian military programs -- both conventional and WMD.<sup>4</sup> This aspect of Iranian assistance has been significant, but it constitutes only part of the bilateral strategic relationship between these allies.

### Foreign Investment in Syria

Also important to Damascus -- and specifically for the maintenance of the Assad regime that is increasingly facing diplomatic and economic pressures -- is Iranian foreign direct investment (FDI) in Syria. Syria has benefited in recent years from significant FDI, particularly from cash-rich Gulf states like Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE.<sup>5</sup> Iran, too, is investing heavily in Syria and is concentrating on industry and infrastructure-related sectors.

Because of the secretive nature of Syria, it is difficult to find reliable statistics on the amounts Iran has actually invested -- as opposed to committed -- in Syria. According to sources in Syria, however, total Iranian investments there amount to about \$1.5 billion.<sup>6</sup> Among the most prominent Iranian industrial investments have been two Syrian-Iranian joint-venture automobile factories, an Iranian-Venezuelan-Malaysian oil refinery deal, and an Iranian cement factory in Hama. The most recent car plant -- called SAIBA -- was opened in 2008 at a cost of \$50 million; the refinery contract is worth \$2.6 billion, of which Iran will receive 26 percent of the revenues.<sup>7</sup> As part of this deal, Syria will receive 7,000 barrels of oil per day for at least 25 years.<sup>8</sup>

At present, Iranian investment in Syria only constitutes a portion of that of Arab states, but it is steady and consistent. According to some analysts, Iranian investment amounts to nearly 10 percent of all FDI in Syria,<sup>9</sup> but Iran is looking to increase its stake in Syria. One sector targeted by Iran is natural gas. Based on an agreement signed last year, Tehran is also slated to start exporting 3 billion cubic meters of Iranian natural gas per year to Syria.<sup>10</sup>

Damascus has been effusive in its public praise for the capital invested by Tehran. President Assad's comments at the opening of the SAIBA factory in December 2007 encapsulate the Syrian position. "Operating the plant with the participation of our Iranian brothers is a proper response to all attempts with an aim of sowing discord between the two friendly nations."<sup>11</sup> He then added, "I affirm, on this occasion, that the relations would not be shaken for any reason or under any circumstance."<sup>12</sup>

#### Syria's Economic Position

Some economic reforms, the influx of a million Iraqi refugees, and the flood of FDI -- in part fueled by Tehran -- helped Damascus at least temporarily bolster its economic situation. Indeed, according to the IMF, as of Summer 2007, Syria had recovered from five years of weak growth, achieved economic recovery, and it was assessed that the "near-term outlook for growth and inflation is favorable."<sup>13</sup> Still, the IMF noted, "challenges posed by the further depletion of oil reserves are daunting."

Syria currently produces 370,000 barrels of oil per day, down from a one-time high of nearly 600,000, and this production is declining every year. Meanwhile, domestic demand is 335,000 bpd. Normally, this would suggest self-sufficiency, but not in the case of Syria, which at present -- and likely through 2013 -- only has the capacity to refine 240,000 bpd.<sup>14</sup>

Increased political pressures, a growing fiscal deficit, rising food prices, and the ongoing depletion of oil reserves have placed Damascus in a precarious situation. In April 2008, budget problems forced Syria to end its long-standing system of gasoline subsidies, which provided residents with the commodity at below market prices. The Syrian government has also been discussing cutting the subsidy on -- or rationing -- diesel fuel, which is in even shorter supply.<sup>15</sup> When it eventually happens, this cut is likely to result in increased food prices, and may play havoc with Syrian industry -- which is to a large extent fueled by diesel generators (to avoid spotty government-run electricity service).

#### Syria's Political Position

On the political front, the Assad regime faces an increasingly untenable situation. In the coming months, the international tribunal tasked with prosecuting the murderers of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri will finally be operational. Syria is the leading suspect in the crime, and senior regime officials could be implicated. In the event that Damascus refuses to cooperate -- either by sending witnesses or extraditing suspects -- the UN Security Council could levy severe (Chapter VII) sanctions. Syria has already indicated that it will not send suspects to the court, setting the stage for a showdown.

Syria may also be on the hook for about a dozen political assassinations in Lebanon both before and after the Hariri murder. Most of these killings appear to have been intended to intimidate and/or topple the Western-leaning, anti-Syrian, Lebanese government led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and the March 14th coalition. These killings are also being investigated by the UN tribunal.

The assassination in Damascus of Hizbullah's operations chief, Imad Mughniyeh, on February 12, 2008, was another blow to the regime. In particular, the fact that the killing occurred in Damascus was a great embarrassment to the Assad regime, highlighting that it was unable to protect the terrorists for whom it provided sanctuary.<sup>16</sup> The assassination -- and the lack of any Syrian response, against Israel or anyone else -- was a clear demonstration of regime impotence. As Mughniyeh's aunt told AFP, "We were shocked to learn that he was killed in Syria. We thought he was safe there."<sup>17</sup>

Compounding these pressures for Syria was the Israeli bombing of an alleged North Korean-supplied nuclear facility on September 6, 2007,<sup>18</sup> another grave embarrassment for the Assad regime. Initially, the Syrians claimed it was only an airspace violation; then, a strike against a simple military facility, for which it pledged retaliation.<sup>19</sup> As

details have emerged about the attack, however, the regime's silence at the time as to the nature of the facility was deafening. Israeli Prime Minister Olmert's remarkable conciliatory remarks some ten days later that he had "a lot of respect for the Syrian leader and for Syrian policy" may have taken some of the sting out of the attack, but the brazenness of the operation further undermined Assad.

The Assad regime is likewise increasingly feeling the pressure of isolation within the Arab system, as it faces an unprecedented backlash from its continued pernicious meddling in Lebanon. Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa even publicly blamed Syria for the ongoing morass in Beirut.

So damaging was the Assad regime's role in finding a compromise solution to the Lebanese presidential crisis that several Arab states conspicuously slighted Syria in April 2008 at the Damascus Arab Summit. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and, to a lesser extent, Jordan led an effort to convince other Arab states to downgrade their representation at the annual event. Only a few Arab states sent their head of state; Saudi Arabia's delegation was led by its ambassador to the Arab League, a particularly low level of representation for the kingdom. The Assad regime had hoped that the summit -- the first ever in Damascus -- would be a great success, signaling the end of its isolation. Instead, despite efforts to arrange a final summit communiqué sympathetic to Syria (with Libyan assistance), the summit communiqué was indifferent to Syria's plight.<sup>20</sup>

The event fizzled and was an embarrassment for the regime. Contrary to Assad's hopes, the whole exercise merely confirmed Syria's pariah status in the Arab world. With pressures increasing, the Assad regime is now focusing again on its second-tier strategy for ending the international tribunal and emerging from isolation -- by initiating peace negotiations with Israel.

#### Syria and Israel

Most Syria analysts agree that the top three priorities of the Assad regime are: (1) regime survival, (2) reasserting Syrian influence -- if not a more robust Syrian presence -- in Lebanon, and (3) regaining the Golan Heights. From a tactical perspective, engaging in negotiations with Israel would assure the regime of accomplishing two, if not all three, of these goals.

First, despite the fact that the Hariri tribunal is allegedly independent, it is highly unlikely that the international community would maintain its enthusiasm for the pursuit of truth if it meant the indictment of senior officials in the Assad regime. After all, this would scuttle any ongoing Israeli-Syrian negotiations. In any event, we have already seen, with then Secretary General Kofi Annan's political expunging of references to senior Syrian leadership in the first investigation report, that the UN investigation is not truly "independent."<sup>21</sup>

Second, senior Israeli officials have already conceded that a peace agreement with Syria would entail the return of the Golan Heights. Finally, the wildcard for the Syrians is Lebanon. Many Syrians believe -- and Lebanese routinely voice concern -- that an Israel-Syria deal would be at the expense of Lebanon. Privately, many Israeli officials indicate that if Syria made the appropriate concessions, Israel would have no qualms with a Syrian return to Lebanon.<sup>22</sup> Some Israelis even suggest that they could arrange to insulate the Assad regime from the consequences of the tribunal.<sup>23</sup>

The ramifications for Lebanon not only concern a resumption of Syrian suzerainty. Former Israeli Foreign Ministry official Alon Liel has advocated the forced settlement of nearly 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon as part of an Israeli peace with Syria.<sup>24</sup> This recommendation, coming from the leading Israeli advocate for negotiations with Syria, not only flies in the face of U.S. policy, but is perhaps the only issue on which all Lebanese agree: Palestinian refugees will not be offered Lebanese citizenship.

The Syrians, via their proxies, have made clear that they see bilateral negotiations with Israel as a way to renew contacts with Washington and end the international isolation and pressure on Syria.<sup>25</sup> This would also undercut the

credibility of France and Washington's leading Arab allies -- Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan (and Lebanon) -- which have all taken very forward-leaning positions vis-à-vis Damascus.

Thus, negotiations, even without fruition, entail great benefits to the Syrians. Recognizing this, even before the Hariri killing in February 2005, the Syrians had cynically employed the notion of negotiations with Israel as a means of deflecting international and regional pressures. This Syrian tactic has a long history. In 2003, under pressure from the U.S. for facilitating the flow of insurgents into Iraq, Assad floated the idea of peace negotiations with Israel. Then in 2004, after the UN passed Security Council Resolution 1559 -- calling for Syrian departure from Lebanon -- the Syrian leadership once again mentioned the possibility of negotiations. In 2005, immediately following the Hariri assassination -- as the U.S. withdrew its ambassador from Damascus in protest -- Assad once again mentioned peace with Israel.

In 2005 and 2006, the pattern continued. This period was characterized by Syrian peace trial balloons being floated with some frequency, typically a week or so before publication of status reports by the UN Hariri investigation that predictably hinted at Syrian involvement in this murder and other crimes in Lebanon. The theme running throughout the issuance of statements regarding negotiations was that they all came at moments of maximum pressure, raising questions about Syrian sincerity.

#### A Realistic View of Splitting Syria from Iran

Splitting Syria off from Iran could have a profound effect on the Middle East, so it's no wonder that policy-makers in Israel and Washington have contemplated initiatives with an eye toward achieving this goal. Bush Administration officials were even considering options for fomenting a split in 2006,<sup>26</sup> but appear to have reached the conclusion that this tactic would be fruitless. Israeli officials, however, continue to be preoccupied with this vision of a new Middle East with Damascus firmly planted in the pro-Western camp.

For Israel, of course, the split would be the primary benefit of an agreement with Damascus. After all, for decades, the Golan has been Israel's quietist border, even more so than its borders with its peace partners in Egypt and Jordan. As such, the only tangible benefit of peace with Damascus would be the corresponding diminished military capabilities of Hamas and Hizbullah that presumably would follow. The sine qua non for any agreement would be an end of Syrian support for these groups, a move that would undermine relations between Damascus and Tehran.

Despite the fact that the Assad regime has given no signal that it might be tempted to move out of Tehran's orbit -- and indeed, the Syrians repeatedly proclaim they will not -- Israel's political leadership (as well as many of the state's leading Syria analysts) seem to believe that now is the time to test Damascus. In April 2008, Prime Minister Olmert seemingly stated publicly and without prompting that Israel would be willing to cede the entire Golan for a peace agreement with Syria. While this Israeli position is not new -- it is essentially a repeat of the 1993 "Rabin Deposit" -- it was an opening that touched off intense speculation that an Assad-Olmert summit might be in the offing.

Syrian officials moved quickly to quash this speculation, announcing that it would take 1-3 years of negotiations before a deal would be reached, and that a summit was not in the cards.<sup>27</sup> But the lack of enthusiasm from Damascus has not dampened the optimism in Israel. Even prominent Syria experts in Israel, who are under no illusions as to the nature of the Assad regime, have been publicly pressing for a resumption of a Syria peace track.<sup>28</sup>

#### The View from Washington

The view from Washington is decidedly more sober. After years of engaging the Syrians, in 2005 the Bush Administration came to the conclusion that the Assad regime was basically irredeemable. The U.S. would continue to employ leverage in an effort to compel better Syrian behavior, but realized the limitations of engagement. Washington understood it could neither convince the Assad regime of the wisdom of switching sides, nor could it purchase a reformed Syria.

Perhaps more importantly, Washington -- unlike Israel -- was invested in the success of Lebanon, the only pro-Western, democratically-elected Arab government. The Bush Administration understood that engagement with Damascus necessarily would undermine Washington's allies, further empowering Hizbullah and Iran. With the costs of engagement so high and the prospects of success so low, the U.S. has pursued a policy of working with its regional and European allies to increase the pressure on Syria in the hope of forcing change.

In a broader sense, looking at the same evidence as Israel, the Bush Administration came to a fundamentally different assessment of the chances of fomenting a split in Damascus' relations with Tehran. Yes, there are some differences between Syria and Iran on policy issues like Lebanon, but where differences do exist, they are difficult to exploit.

Given their reliable economic and military strategic relationship, it is difficult to see what considerations might tempt Damascus to move away from its patron in Tehran. In addition, Syrian support for Hizbullah and Hamas is part of the glue that ingratiate the Assad regime to Iran. What's more, over time, Syria would find Washington to be neither as financially generous nor as politically reliable as its ally in Tehran.

One need look no further than U.S.-Egypt relations to see the potential problems with Syria: in 2008, Congress voted to condition U.S. foreign assistance to Cairo on improvements on human rights. And human rights are much worse in Syria -- "deplorable" according to Human Rights Watch. Given Syria's human rights track record, U.S. support for Syria -- for a free trade agreement, membership in the World Trade Organization, and USAID funding -- would be fickle at best.

The Assad regime is aware that Washington would be an undependable ally, and will not sever ties with Iran. The top Syrian emissary dealing with contacts with Israel via Turkish mediators repeated Damascus' position on April 29, 2008. Dr. Samir Taqi, who heads the Syria-based Center for Oriental Studies, told Hizbullah's Al Manar television, "It would be naive to think Syria will neglect or abandon its strategic alliances that do not stem from the Arab-Israeli conflict."<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, contrary to assertions that conditions are ripe for a split because there is "no ideological link between [Syria] and Iran," there is a very clear ideological alliance between the two states pertaining to their regional vision. Both Damascus and Tehran are fundamentally at odds with the United States. Specifically, Syria and Iran share the view that their interests are not served by a strong U.S. presence in the Middle East.<sup>30</sup>

#### Restarting the Syrian Track -- The Question of Timing

Given the unequivocal Syrian position on this matter -- and given that a split is basically the only benefit for Israel in the event of a return of the Golan -- it is difficult to understand Israel's rush to the negotiating table. It is not that Washington is opposed to Israel making peace with its Arab neighbors, but the timing of restarting a Syrian track is key. To do so now would effectively end the broad international coalition's effort to isolate and pressure Damascus. It would also prejudice the work of the international tribunal prosecuting Hariri's murderers.

Clearly, pressure has not yet succeeded in forcing Damascus to moderate its destabilizing regional policies. But with Syria's economy deteriorating and the tribunal -- and indictments -- on the horizon, now is a particularly bad time to engage the Assad regime. Washington and a large coalition of European and Arab states support a continuation of the current policy, in large part because Syrian behavior and its articulated policies all suggest that hopes for a split with Tehran are unrealistic.

Israeli re-engagement with Syria now breaks this coalition, risks a significant setback on Lebanon, and undermines efforts to moderate unproductive Syrian behavior. Until now, concerned about the negative impact this might have on relations with the Bush Administration, the government of Israel had held off on a full-fledged engagement offensive.

The Israeli policy of restraint ended in May 2008, when, within days of the Hizbullah military takeover of Beirut, the government of Israel announced that it had officially resumed negotiations with Syria in Turkey. Coming on the same day as the Doha Agreement -- in which the pro-Western March 14th-led government of Lebanon was compelled to accept increased political power for Hizbullah in Lebanon -- Israel's timing could not have been worse. Not only did the announcement rub salt in the wounds of Washington's wounded ally, it preempted any international effort to penalize Syria and/or Iran for Hizbullah's egregious attack on Lebanon.

Not surprisingly, the Assad regime merely pocketed this diplomatic gain, providing no sign that it had any intention to meet Israeli requirements. Indeed, within days of the Turkey announcement, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni reiterated the stipulation that successful negotiations were dependent on the need for Syria to "distance itself completely" from its "problematic ties" to Tehran.<sup>31</sup> The predictable response from Damascus: "Syria's international ties are not negotiable."<sup>32</sup>

With the costs for Lebanon so high and the indications so clear that the Syria track will not anytime soon achieve the minimum Israeli definition of success, it does not make sense for Israel to be pushing ahead with negotiations now. Regardless of what transpires in the talks, Syria will benefit, and what remains of the pro-Western government in Beirut will suffer. By the time the Syria track breaks down, March 14th could be a trend of the past, leaving Iran, Syria, and their Lebanese ally Hizbullah in an even stronger position. This situation would serve neither U.S. nor Israeli interests.

David Schenker is a senior fellow in Arab politics at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. From 2002 to 2006, he served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense as country director for Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories. This analysis was written for the Institute for Contemporary Affairs of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

#### Notes

1. In Israel and the U.S., there is a small but vocal camp of advocates for a resumption of the high-level dialogue between Washington and Damascus which was suspended for all intents and purposes following the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. The most articulate and outspoken supporters of this view are Alon Liel, a former official in the Israeli Foreign Ministry, and Robert Malley, who served as a Middle East director in the National Security Council during the Clinton Administration. Liel, who now heads the Israel-Syria Peace Society, believes Israel can "assist the Western world in breaking the Syrian-Iranian coalition." At the end of a six-month peace process, he says, "we will see that you [Syria] changed camps." Indeed, by the end of 2009, he predicts, Israel and Syria could easily reach "a comprehensive and permanent peace." A deal would be simple, Liel argues, because there is "no ideological link between it [Syria] and Iran." Interview with Dr. Alon Liel, Head of the Israel-Syria Peace Society, Nazer Majli, Asharq al-Awsat English, March 18, 2008, [www.asharq-e.com/print.asp?artid=id12136](http://www.asharq-e.com/print.asp?artid=id12136) (<http://www.asharq-e.com/print.asp?artid=id12136>)

As Liel sees it, Syria would not have to "break off its relations with a friendly country," because a peace treaty would "impose new rules on the region." In this new environment, Syria will modify its behavior because "it would be illogical for it to ally itself...with Hizbullah or Hamas. It would be illogical for Syria to supply these organizations with weapons." The only real obstacle to achieving this peace, according to Liel, is Washington, which has decided "to leave Syria in an Iran-Hizbullah axis." Alisair Lyon, "Israel-Syria Peace Feelers Languish in U.S. Freezer," Reuters, September 23, 2007, [www.reuters.com/article/sphereNews/idUSL2351512120070923](http://www.reuters.com/article/sphereNews/idUSL2351512120070923) (<http://www.reuters.com/article/sphereNews/idUSL%202351512120070923>)

The argument set forward by Robert Malley is more nuanced, but is consistent with Liel's. U.S. engagement with Syria would not result in a split between Damascus and Tehran, he says, but "might result" in Syria acting "in more

subtle ways." Engagement is important, he argues, because it will reassure Damascus that the U.S. is not intent on destabilizing the Assad regime. Indeed, it would "prove to you [the Assad regime] that we treat you as a legitimate interlocutor." In the aftermath of an Israeli-Syrian peace, Malley writes: "Damascus knows it will have to rein in its military allies and stop supporting their military activities. Inevitably Hamas, Hizbullah, and Islamic Jihad will reconsider their options...they could be forced to alter their behavior." As for Iran, Malley suggests that this prospective peace will force Tehran to "adjust...its approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict." The alliance will endure, he says, but "Tehran would be compelled to adapt to its new circumstances. Instead of Iran radicalizing Syria, Syria could moderate Iran (emphasis added)." Robert Malley testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Near East, South and Central Asian Affairs Subcommittee, "Syria: Options and Implications for Lebanon and the Region," November 8, 2007.

2. A prominent proponent of this angle is Josh Landis. See, for example, his interview with Renee Montagne, "An Alliance Shaped by Mutual Foes," National Public Radio, August 22, 2007, [www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12635901](http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12635901) (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12635901>)

3. For the best short treatment of the alliance, see Tony Badran's analysis at his Middle East weblog Across the Bay, ❖

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