Marriage Without Certificate: On Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance From the Iranian Revolution to the Arab Revolution

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Syria and Iran have formed a special relation in the past four decades. While researchers 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 attempts to put forward a new hypothesis: quasi-alliance. Based on an empirical study of Syria-Iran special relations in the past four decades, it reveals that quasi-alliance is a unique model for security cooperation in international arena paralleling with formal alliance, and its security arrangement has an unique logic, dynamics, mode of management and attributes. In the new framework of analysis, this paper touches down upon the origins, channels, features and tests of Syria-Iran quasi-alliance by focusing on the diplomatic history of their bilateral relations from 1979 to 2017. The bilateral quasi-alliance practice has undergone three stages of combating Iraqi aggression in 1980s, curbing Israel-Turkey axis in 1990s and balancing U.S.-Israel-Saudi-Turkey coalition in the 21st century, particularly since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war.

Keywords: Syria-Iran relations, alliance theory, Middle East security, quasi-alliance diplomacy, the Arab Revolution

Introduction

Ever since the outbreak of the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, Syria and Iran have maintained an all-round cooperation in economy, politics, and security. Particularly in the field of security, the two parties have formed a long-term tacit agreement through several important channels for consultation. 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 (in 1982 and 2006), the Gulf War (1990-1991), the Iraq War (2003), Iranian Nuclear Crisis (2006-2015), the Gaza War (2008), and the Syrian War (Since 2011). On 6 February 2012, Israel's Haaretz newspaper reported that Gen Qassem Suleimani, the commander of Islamic Revolution Guard Corp's elite overseas operations arm, the Quds Force, had gone to Syria and taken up a position in what

the newspaper described as a "war room" which managed Syrian army manoeuvres against opposition forces (Reynolds, 2012). What are the dynamics of Syria-Iran special relations? 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 Syria-Iran special relations hereafter.

In the field of international security, alliance theory has been qualitatively and quantitatively studied (Liska, 1967; Walt, 1987; Snyder, 1997). However, due to the complex inter-regional 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 (Snyder, 1984, p. 461). Apart from alliance and neutrality, those leaders may explore the third way to balance security autonomy and dependency, such as China-Pakistan, U.S.-Israel, and India-Afghanistan relations respectively. The former Soviet Union established special ties with Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen in 1970s and 1980s.

The informal security partnership is hereby defined as "quasi-alliance", i.e. two or more international entities, based on informal security agreement against external threats, engage in security cooperation. It is a kind of strategic philosophy, mechanism, and action that political leaders use to develop security coordination and cooperation against external threats. If decision-makers view alliance an asset, they will be prone to alliance diplomacy; if decision-makers regard alliance a liability, they will be inclined to neutrality diplomacy; if decision-makers treat alliance as assets and liability simultaneously and attempt to seek a fluid balance between them, they will tend to select the third way—quasi-alliance: a "marriage without certificate".

The Origins of Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance

Syria-Iran quasi-alliance formation is multi-faceted in its dynamics, which can be categorized into two different dimensions.

Firstly, judging by the system level, Syria-Iran quasi-alliance is driven by the balance of power posture in the Middle East. Due to the zero-sum rivalry between the Soviet Union and the U.S., and between Arab states, Israel, Turkey, and Iran, the Middle East were basically in a state of security dilemma in the past three decades, a state of Hobbesian jungle (Wendt, 1999, pp. 254-255). From 1979 to 2010, there were always two conflicting blocs in the Middle East. In the 1980s, the two conflicting blocs were Syria-Iran-Libya quasi-alliance as one bloc and Iraq-Saudi-Jordan quasi-alliance as the other, and they were rivaling with each other from 1980 to 1989; in the 1990s, the two conflicting blocs were Syria-Iran quasi-alliance and Israel-Turkey quasi-alliance, and the two blocs competed with each other for regional leadership; in the 21st century, the two conflicting blocs have shifted to Iran-Syria-Hamas-Hezbollah quasi-alliance, a "coalition of resistance" against the US and Israel, which is often called radical coalition or "HISH Group" by Israel and the West, and Israel-GCC-U.S. quasi-alliance, which attempts to carry forward western predominance in the Middle East (Rubin, 2006, p. 21). 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 multi-polar regional structure in the Middle East was always the major impetus for the formation of Syria-Iran quasi-alliance.

Secondly, viewed from the inter-state level, Syria-Iran quasi-alliance is motivated by their common security concerns. Syria boasts a secular 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 of cooperating with the Islamic Republic;

on January 26, 1979, 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" (Mansfield, 1991, p. 328; Precht, 2004, p. 9). The new government, established by Khomeini in February 1979 was virtually an "isolated island" in the Middle East, opposed by various Sunni and Arab states ranging from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, North Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, etc., and the West were also seriously anxious about Iranian export of radical ideology. Meanwhile, the revolutionary 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 (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2002, p. 297). Despite the fact that Iranian neighboring countries were all suspicious and even fearful of the new regime, Syrian government recognized the Islamic republic. Moreover, in 1980, Iraq, with a tacit agreement with the West and GCC 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 which faced a common threat of Saddam Hussein regime. For instance, Syria was excluded from ACC jointly formed by Egypt, North Yemen, Jordan, and Iraq (Freedman, 1993, p. 279, p. 288). On June 27, 1982, the National Congress of Iraqi Ba'th Party was held, and Syria was harshly criticized of sabotaging Baghdad Summit of Arab Nations, for Syrian support of Iran was believed to have weakened Iraqi capability to launch a holy war against Israel (Kienle, 1990, p. 159). At the threshold of Iran-Iraq War in 1980, Iraqi government foiled an abortive coup against Saddam, who then forced all pro-Syria Iraqi officials to resign, and finally severed diplomatic relations with Syria. For further revenge, Saddam went to great lengths to finance Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the opposition force against Syrian President Hafiz Assad (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch, 2014, p. 89, p. 92).

Iraq-Syria tit-for-tat strategies finally gave birth to Syria-Iran quasi-alliance. Threatened by both Israel and Iraq, Syria found Iran a sole important and reliable force to balance their common enemies. For example, Iran provided Hezbollah with great financial and ammunition support, so that Southern Lebanon became an essential buffer zone between Israel and Syria. In return, in supporting Iranian War against Iraq, Syria transferred arms from the former Soviet Union to Tehran and covertly supported Iraqi Kurdish independence movement (Korany & Dessouki, 1991, p. 384). Syria also attempted to weaken Saddam Hussein regime economically. On the eve of the outbreak of Iran-Iraq War, over 300 thousand barrels of Iraqi oil was 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 Hafiz Assad of Syria even dispatched troops to Syria-Jordan border, forcing Iraq to prepare a possible war on the west line (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch, 2014, p. 95).

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 Autumn 1986, when international community universally charged Syria as a terrorist-supporter, Iran declared that its position to support Hafiz Assad administration remained unchanged (Chubin & Tripp, 1988, p. 184). 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 (Freedman, 1991, p. 308). Syria-Iran quasi-alliance became an important pillar of security community. After the Gulf War ended in 1991, Iraqi force was generally destroyed with its motivation and capability to harm Syria and Iran weakened. However, due to the consolidated Israel-Turkey quasi-alliance in the 1990s, and

due to the updated Israel-U.S. quasi-alliance in the 21st century, Syria and Iran were potential targets to be assaulted. In the following years, Syria-Iran quasi-alliance, far from being undermined, was enhanced in face with the increasingly serious common threat.

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

The Three Channels for Syria-Iran Interaction

Syria-Iran quasi-alliance is pragmatic, 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. Syria-Iran quasi-alliance is generally regarded as 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 allies form a security bloc because they have their respective exchangeable assets, so that all parties can meet their security needs with the help of the others. For instance, in the 1990s, Israel and Turkey established an axis to balance Syria-Iran special relations. 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, Turkish Prime Minister Hikmet Cetin paid a visit to Israel for the first time throughout history (Piccoli, 1999, p. 16). Since then, Israel-Turkey relations achieved an unprecedented development, and their bilateral exchanges of visits were fairly remarkable. On February 23, 1996, encouraged by the U.S., the two sides declared 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 (Piccoli, 1999, p. 16). Partly due to the establishment of Israel-Turkey axis, Turkey worsened its relations with both Syria and Iran, the 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 understandably shocked Turkish government and the media (Ismael & Aydin, 2003, p. 183). In order to support Iran, Syria was said to continue to provide sanctuary to Aabudullah Ocalan, the former leader of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), in mid 1990s, and continue to finance and provide training centers for PKK guerillas abroad. During its negotiation with Turkey, Syria refused to compromise on the distribution of water resources on Euphrates River (Olson, 2001, p. 105). Throughout the 1990s, Syria and Iran came to assist each other when the other side was threatened by Israel or Turkey.

After "911" terrorist attacks, Syria-Iran quasi-alliance still hinged on mutual assistance. For example, on February 14, 2005, former Lebanese Prime Minister Fahd Hariri was assassinated and Syrian government was speculated to stand behind the terrorist attack (Jones, 2007, p. 89). When Syrian Prime Minister Naji al-Oari visited Iran immediately, 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 (Howard, 2007, p. 144). Likewise, after Iranian nuclear crisis worsened, U.S. government frequently demonized Iran as a "Mad Mullah", while U.S. was called a "Great Satan" and Israel a "Little Satan" by Iran too (Beeman, 2005).

Apart from security assistance, Syria and Iran offered each other economic and energy assistance. In the 1980s, Iran provided Syria with a total amount of four hundred million dollars' grant as well as one million barrel oil at a favorable price per year (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch, 2014, p. 31, pp. 99-100).

Table 1

Major Exchange of Visits Between Syrian and Iranian Leaders (1980-1996)

Date	Visitors	Destination	Purposes of Visit
November1980	Iranian Leader Hojjatoleslam Rafsanjani	Syria	Seeking Syrian support in Iran-Iraq War
March 1982	Syrian Vice President Khaddam	Iran	The two countries signed a ten-year trade agreement
January 1983	Iranian Foreign Minister	Syria	Foreign Ministers of Iran, Syria and Libya issued a joint communiqué after a meeting stating that they would stand by Iran
March 1983	Syrian Minister of Oil and Commerce	Iran	unknown
April 1983	Iranian Foreign Minister Velayati	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 Iranian Revolutionary Guards	Syria	Discussing Syria-Iran cooperation in Lebanon and the scope for broader military ties
September 6, 1984	Supreme Leader Khamenei	Syria	unknown
June 28, 1986	Iranian Vice Foreign Minister	Syria	The two countries reiterated that their security cooperation is "strategic"
January 3, 1989	Syrian Foreign Minister	Iran	unknown
September 1990	Syrian President Hafiz Assad	Iran	Presidents Rafsanjani and Assad issued a joint communiqué praising their bilateral security cooperation
April 30, 1991	Iranian President Rafsanjani	Syria	Rafsanjani persuaded Assad to allow Hezbollah to remain armed
January 3, 1993	Syrian Vice President Khaddam	Iran	unknown
June 22, 1995	Syrian Vice President Khaddam	Iran	Attending the seventh session of the Iran-Syria Supreme Joint Committee
February 27, 1996	Iranian Vice President Habibi	Syria	unknown

Souce: Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch (2014), pp. 207-222.

The second channel is the exchange of visits between the two sides' leaders. 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 civil aviation flights between the two countries per week, which laid a solid foundation for the official exchanges of visits between them (Ehteshami & Hinnebusch, 2014, p. 31, pp. 99-100). On January 19, 2006, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, former Iranian President, paid a two-day visit to Syria and the two countries signed several bilateral agreements. As to Iranian nuclear issue, Bashar Assad, President of Syria reiterated that Syria opposed other countries' pressure on Iran. On the 21st of the same month, the two sides signed a joint declaration, through which Iran urged that Israel return the occupied land to Syria and Syria in return placed emphasis on the universal legitimate right of all sovereign countries to use nuclear technology for peaceful purpose, including Iran (SUN, 2006, p. 30). This was just the tip of the iceberg in Syria-Iran frequent exchanges of visits (see Table 1).

The third channel is informal security agreement. In March 1983, the Foreign Ministers of Iran, Syria, and Libya assembled in Damascus, capital of Syria, and issued a tri-party declaration highlighting that the three countries would stick together through thick and thin in Iranian counterstrike against Iraq. This declaration laid a sound foundation for Syria-Iran quasi-alliance. To further combat Israeli threat, Syria and Iran inked a

strategic cooperation treaty in 2004, symbolizing their closer bilateral relations. In June 2006, the two administrations signed another defense pact with limited functions, and the details of the pact are still beyond the public ken. 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 (United States Institute of Peace, 2007, p. 2). The above-mentioned security agreements were by nature informal, because they were signed by administrative branches to avoid being ratified by parliaments to become laws. That guaranteed the two sides to engage in security cooperation without sacrificing too much sovereignty.

The Unique Features of Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance

Quasi-alliance can be generally categorized into two types: cooperative and competitive. Here "cooperative" and "competitive" are both relative. 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 (SUN, 2008, p. 41). Obviously, the former tends to consolidate quasi-alliance, while the latter tends to undermine it. In a broad sense, Syria-Iran quasi-alliance belongs to cooperative mode, and their security cooperation is characterized by the following attributes.

Firstly, the quasi-alliance is covert. As Hans J. Morgenthau (1985) 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 (p. 203). Syria-Iran security cooperation is mainly in their diplomatic practice which can be observed and sensed in reality, but the principles for cooperation was not in a formal written form. Actually, in propaganda and public information, the two countries have never admitted that they are formal alliance like U.S.-Australia or U.S.-South Korea relations. Instead, Syria and Iran are both proud of their non-alignment policy and sometimes openly criticize U.S.-led western military alliance, regarding the western military bloc as the source of instability and wars in the world. Syria and Iran are covert brothers instead of a registered couple.

Secondly, the quasi-alliance is stable. In the past three decades, Syria-Iran cooperation is quite smooth. On the one hand, this kind of smooth security cooperation results from their religious and sectarian 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 (1987) underscores, threat is essentially determined by aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions (pp. 22-25). The last three decades have witnessed overwhelming external threat challenging both Syria and Iran. Saddam regime in 1980s, Israel and Turkey in 1990s as well as Israel and U.S. after "911" terrorist attacks have all showed their respective strong capability and motivation to do harm to both Syria and Iran, and Tehran-Damascus axis has been frequently demonized as the "Axis of Instability" in the Middle East. External threat has consolidated Syria-Iran security cooperation; cultural and religious affinity is the soft foundation, and common security interest is the hard foundation in the quasi-alliance.

Thirdly, the quasi-alliance is asymmetrical. There are two-fold implications of asymmetry in Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance. On the one hand, Iran relies on Syria more than Syria relies on Iran in the 1990s, and the case is opposite since the outbreak of Syrian civil war in 2011. The fundamental reason lies in that Iran, not Syria was often at the front of confrontation with other regional and global hegemony in three decades after the Islamic

Revolution, such as Iraq in 1980s, Israel and Turkey in 1990s and U.S. and Israel in the 21st century, so Iran has been habitually treated with "a stick". Syria, compared with Iran, was more moderate and was regarded as being less dangerous, for it was a secular society with no intention to carry forward extreme ideology like that of Iran. On the other hand, Iran is a senior brother, and Syria a junior brother in terms of comprehensive national power. Judging by population, territory, natural resources, size of army, navy and air force, Iran ranks the first in the Gulf region[1]. Syria's population is only one quarter of that in Iran and its territory is one eighth of Iran[2]. Moreover, since 2011, Syrian national security and territorial integrity hinge on Iran and Russia; Syrian hard and soft power is relatively limited in the Middle East. Unlike Iran, Syria has no clear grand strategy in Caspian Sea, Central Asia, Latin America, and East Asia as Iran has.

Fourthly, the quasi-alliance is both defensive and offensive. As Alexander Wendt (1999) puts it, theoretically speaking, all states could be categorized into two groups, the offensive powers and defensive powers. The former refers to nations which have strong motive and capability to conquer other nations and overthrow international *status quo*; the latter refers to nations which neither have motive or capability to conquer other nations, nor are they ready to overthrow international *status quo* (p. 124). Yet it is hard to put Syria-Iran quasi-alliance into the shoes. The two states have consistently maintained a defense-offense balance in their quasi-alliance strategies. On the one hand, they are vigilant to external subversion and have to keep a defensive stance particularly since Israeli military exercises in the Mediterranean Sea in November 2008 (Frykberg, 2008, p. 30). On the other hand, 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.

Finally, the quasi-alliance is limited. In their three-decade-long security consultation and coordination, neither party has offered the other side a "blank check", for neither of them is willing to provide unconditional economic and military support. Although Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard's military support is crucial to Assad Regime's survival, Tehran is not tantamount to Russia, who provided even more vital and all-round support to guarantee Syrian government's security. Political leaders of the two countries are so pragmatic in diplomacy that they have never dreamed of obtaining one hundred percent assurance, should they were involved in crisis. Neither of them pins a high expectation on quasi-alliance not because quasi-ally's aid is insignificant, but because neither party is willing to sacrifice their own independence and sovereignty for brotherly sake. After all, quasi-alliance is a compensation of their respective security strategy, not the replacement of their respective national security strategies.

The Tests of Syria-Iran Quasi-alliance Solidarity

Is Syria-Iran quasi-alliance efficient? Can the two sides meet their security needs? 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 Israeli Defense Force, killing three soldiers and kidnapping two more. Israel was, consequently, determined to retaliate and launch 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 (Moore & Cody, 2006). After the

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[1] Iranian Military Capability, http://9link.116.com.cn/globe/540456fd519b961f/yilang/yilangjunduibukexiaoqu
[2] Iranian Military Capability, http://mil.news.sohu.com/20060810/n244729739.shtml

outbreak of the war, Syria, Iran, Hezbollah and Southern Iraqi Shiites formed an anti-Israeli coalition, which was habitually called "Shiite Crescent". Iran reportedly sent 500 military officials to train Hezbollah and granted the latter 100 million dollars (Byman, 2005, p. 88). Syria-Iran quasi-alliance effectively compensated Hezbollah's military, economic, and strategic disadvantage in its rival with Israel. Actually the quasi-alliance was so effective that Zeev Sternhell, an Israeli historian, publicly admitted that, from Israeli perspective, "the Lebanon War is the least successful throughout Israeli history" (Malm & Esmailian, 2007, p. 215).

The second case is Iranian nuclear issue. Ever since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected President in 2005, Iranian nuclear issue has become a hot-spot drawing world-wide attention. U.S. 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 its nuclear weapons. As Donald Rumsfeld, the former U.S. 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 develop ballistic missiles and even nuclear weapons" (Gertz, 2004, pp. 90-91). Israel strongly opposed Iran to obtain nuclear weapons, because firstly, it intended to keep its nuclear monopoly in the Middle East unchallenged; secondly, it wanted to maintain a favorable balance of power in the Persian Gulf; and thirdly, it strove to prevent nuclear proliferation among radical groups or regimes in the Middle East. During his visit to the White House, Netanyahu, Israeli Prime Minister claimed that, by the end of 2009, U.S., Israel and the international community would have to make a final decision on Iranian nuclear issue—they would either accept the reality that Iran was a nuclear power, or take military action (New York Times, 2009). In order to counter U.S. and Israeli economic embargo, political sanction, 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 threat in the Middle East to meet common challenge (Wright & Baker, 2005).

The third case is the Gaza War in late 2008. For several years, Hamas has been condemned of being Iranian "puppet", just like Hezbollah in Lebanon. It reportedly received at least 25 million dollars from Iran annually (The USA Today, 2009). Israeli government grieved that from 2001 to 2008, Hamas shelled 8000 rockets, killing 24 Israeli civilians, injuring over 1000, and forcing 240 thousand Israelis to displace. On December 27, 2008, Israel launched a war against Hamas as retaliation. After the Gaza War broke out, Syria-Iran quasi-alliance began to function again, aiming at coming to rescue Hamas. Manouchehr Mottaki, 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 Palestinians. He personally proclaimed that Iran would support anti-Israeli force until Israel perishes one day. Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme 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 Gaza battle (Global Information Network, 2009). On January 7, 2009, Ali Larijani, one of the two representatives of the supreme leader Ali Khamenei, held talks with Khaled Meshaal, the political leader of Hamas in Damascus. Meshaal sang high praise for Iranian moral and economic support (Targeted News Service, 2009). 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 the joint Iranian and Syrian support.

Judging by the three cases mentioned above, Syria-Iran quasi-alliance is of great efficiency and effect. That is not because they've formulated perfect or highly efficient mechanism, but because they always face common external threat and share common interest. Ideally each of them wants to be independent in foreign 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 a lot with each other in strategic arena, and in the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that the quasi-alliance will collapse.

Conclusion

Up till now, the informal security arrangement, thereby referred to quasi-alliance, remains a "gray zone", which has been neglected. For instance, in the past four decades, Syria and Iran have engaged in broad security cooperation, but they are reluctant to sign formal mutual defense pact. Their cooperation is based on informal security arrangement, such as joint communiqué and other informal security treaties. Syria-Iran quasi-alliance is driven by bipolar system in the Middle East as well as their shared common security interest, including combating Iraqi invasion in the 1980s, countering Israel-Turkey axis in the 1990s, and balancing Israel-U.S. hegemony in the 21st century. To manage the quasi-alliance, the two countries have relied on informal security treaties, exchanges of top leaders, and mutual assistance, and they have maintained cooperative relations throughout the past 37 years. Judging by Lebanon War in 2006, Iranian nuclear crisis since 2006, Gaza War in 2008, and the Syrian civil war since 2011, Syria and Iran have fulfilled their obligations in security field to each other. After the outbreak of the Arab Revolution since early 2011, particularly since the outbreak of riot and rebel-led demonstrations, Syrian government was faced with overwhelming challenge from both inside and outside, and the regime received great political and diplomatic pressure from Arab countries, Turkey, Israel, EU, and US. In such a worsening situation, Iran offered important moral, diplomatic, political, and military support as usual symbolizing the unshakable "Damascus-Tehran Axis". The Iranian generous support is one of the major cornerstones for Assad government to defeat the "Islamic State" and the opposition forces. The US-Saudi-Turkey-Israeli quasi-alliance has consolidated Syria-Iran-Hezbollah quasi-alliance, and the latter one is also called "a coalition of resistance". After the Assad regime recovers more and more territory from the "Islamic State", and after Iran sign the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with great powers, Syria-Iran quasi-alliance will be further consolidated in face of the consistent turbulence in the Middle East.

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