

## **Syria Defiant on Ties With Iran**

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A new Syrian defence pact with Iran is a direct challenge to Israel and the United States, but analysts say it will not ultimately jeopardise peace negotiations between Damascus and Tel Aviv.

Syrian and Iranian officials provided few details of the cooperation agreement, announced by Tehran's official IRNA news agency last week. However, citing security sources, the Israeli website DEBKAFfile reported that Syria's missile programme would be integrated into a new command structure that comes under the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

"The mutual defence agreement has come as a natural response to the tense situation in the region," said Maher Malandi, head of the international law department at Damascus University.

He said the two countries needed to join forces in order to defy the international pressure placed on them – in Syria's case because of its alleged role in political strife in Lebanon, and Iran because of its nuclear programme. "The two countries' efforts must be united, especially because the superpowers are now in Iraq, which lies amidst Arab Muslim countries. This represents a threat to regional stability and to the security of the two countries."

The defence pact was signed a few days after Israeli officials called on Syria to cool the relationship with Tehran in exchange for a peace deal. The Syrian-Israeli talks are being conducted indirectly, with Turkey as a mediator.

Damascus is defiant, saying relations with Iran will not be sacrificed for peace with Israel.

A 26-year-old master's student in international relations at Damascus University said the security agreement "is a direct message threatening Israel", and that Syria and Iran would defend one another if either were attacked.

Joshua Landis, co-director of the Centre for Middle East Studies at Oklahoma University, said the new agreement "clearly complicates" the peace process, but would not jeopardise the negotiations.

"The only reason that Israel is talking to Syria today is because Syria is Iran's ally," he said. "Israel is talking peace because they're frightened of Syria, they're frightened of Hezbollah and they're frightened of Iran."

Landis said that apart from a desire to curb ties between Damascus and Tehran, Israel was also interested in talking to the Syrians about securing its northern borders with Lebanon from attack by the Syrian- and Iranian-backed Hezbollah militia. He also noted that Israel wants the Syrians to reduce their support for the Palestinian group Hamas.

If Syria can deliver on some of these demands and make the Israelis feel more secure, Tel Aviv might be

willing to back down on the issue of ties with Iran.

Analysts note that the security pact is a continuation of the long-established Iranian-Syrian axis and therefore cannot have come as a surprise to either Israel or the US.

The alliance took off in 1980, when Syria backed Iran against Iraq when those two countries embarked on their eight-year war.

Mustafa Qalaji, secretary-general of the Syrian Democratic Party, argues that Syria needs to strengthen relations with Iran in order to maintain a power balance in the Middle East. The Arab countries are not united on regional issues such as on how to deal with Israel, he said, so the alliance with Tehran becomes even more important.

“It’s necessary to have powers facing [Israel],” he said. “There must be a strategic relationship with Iran because there is no unified Arab stance in this regard.”

Landis predicted that Syria would maintain a strong relationship with Iran as it continued to be isolated internationally. “As long as everyone is trying to boycott Syria and isolate it, it’s going to keep its friends,” Landis said. “And Iran is a friend.”

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

**Location:** Middle East  
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