

# Is Assad Better Friends of Iran & Putin Than Syrian Citizens?

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Is Syria's President Bashar al-Assad seemingly better friends of Iran & Russia's Putin than his own Syrian citizens? The answer is yes, but the reason why has four parts. The first part has to do with the history of Islam.

## **Reason 1, Schism in Islam.**

When the Prophet Muhammad died in 632 AD, a fight to the death broke out between the Sunni and Shi'a branches of the Muslim religion over who would take over leadership of the religion.. One group, the Shi'a, backed the son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet, Ali, as the new Islamic world leader. The other group, the Sunni, backed a close companion of the Prophet and high Muslim theologian, Abu Bakr[1]. From the beginning, the two groups have fought to the death for control over the Caliphate, the Islamic world government. Most of the citizens of Syria are Sunnis. President Assad, however, is a member of a small sect of Shi'a in Syria. Religiously this means Assad identifies more closely with Iranians than he does with the majority of his citizens who are Sunni and why the Syrian civil war between Assad and his people is divided along Sunni-Shi'a lines.

## **Reason 2: The Territorial Ambitions of Iran**

Shiite Iran believes they are destined to assert itself as the leader of both sides of Islam and the Islamic world government, the Caliphate, that will rule everyone on the planet. To achieve this goal, Iran needs access to Israel (to destroy it) and the Mediterranean Sea. Iran used Hezbollah, a Shi'a terrorist group they fund, to occupy the country of Lebanon bordering on Israel's northern border and the Mediterranean Sea. Iran sees President Assad a Shi'a like themselves, as a natural ally being attacked by Sunnis. They came to his aid and fielded tens of thousands of Hezbollah soldiers along with Shiite militias from Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan to fight on the side of Syrian President, Assad in the Syrian civil war. These militias played a critical role in defeating the Sunni rebel groups in the Syrian civil war as well as fighting against the Sunni ISIS Caliphate in Syria and Iraq.

## **Reason 3: President Obama and the Retreat of American Influence**

President Obama changed the focus of American foreign policy and abandoned American's position of influence in the Middle East that had been hard won in the cold war. President Obama was echoing the policies of President Carter who allowed Ayatollah Khomeini to return to Iran, replace the Shah and create the international

hostage crisis. During the Reagan administration, the hostages came home, and the Soviet Union collapsed leaving the United States as the sole superpower. The emergence of Iran as a Shi'a nuclear state began a destabilization of the Middle East and worried our Sunni allies. President Obama focused American efforts to halt Iranian nuclear efforts on obtaining a treaty with Shiite Iran. He also prematurely recalled American forces from Iraq and refused to assert US leadership with Assad's early use of chemical weapons. The result was a power vacuum that allowed for the formation of a radicalized Sunni Caliphate, ISIS, in parts of Syria and Iraq. The whole northern extent of the Middle East descended into chaos with the rise of ISIS.

### **Putin Reasserts Russian Influence in the Middle East.**

Russia has been and is one of the core suppliers of equipment and facilities for Iran's nuclear fuel enrichment technology that is the core of their bomb development process. To the degree that Shi'a Iran becomes a military threat to the largely Sunni Middle East, Russia's influence over world energy supplies increase. This matches Putin's use of oil and gas supplies in Europe as a means of influencing NATO and former Eastern Europe. Russia's Putin realized that the growing Obama led power vacuum would allow him to easily reassert Russia's geopolitical influence in the Middle East that had been eliminated with the fall of the Soviet state. He began funding, arming and training Assad's military as the Assad-Iranian military alliance started to defeat the Sunni civil war rebels. With Russia military participating, Assad was able to remain in power and keep the United States from taking him out of power. Not only was he right about regaining influence, he was able to foil American desires and receive military bases for the Russian army and navy as well as airfields for the Russian air force.

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[1] BBC (2009) Sunni and Shi'a. BBC website/religion/. downloaded from [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/subdivisions/sunnishia\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/subdivisions/sunnishia_1.shtml)

[2] Alaaldin, Ranj (2018) How Iran Used the Hezbollah Model to Dominate Iraq and Syria. New York Times website <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/30/opinion/iran-hezbollah-iraq-syria.html>