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## Syria plays mediator in Iran-France tensions

By **HUSSEIN DAKROUB**  
 The Associated Press  
 Wednesday, August 12, 2009; 11:42 AM

BEIRUT -- Syria's assistance to [France](#) in winning the release of an embassy employee on trial in Tehran signaled to the West that Damascus wants to help defuse tensions over [Iran's](#) postelection turmoil, analysts said Wednesday.

France on Tuesday specifically thanked Syria, Iran's closest Arab ally, among countries that had "provided their support" to help free Nazak Afshar, a French-Iranian citizen who is a defendant in a mass trial of pro-reform opposition supporters accused of trying to mount a "soft" revolution in Iran. An Iranian news agency reported Wednesday that French academic Clotilde Reiss, also on trial, could be released soon on bail.

Afshar's release was "a joint Iranian and Syria message" to the West about readiness to improve ties, said Edmond Saab, executive editor of An-Nahar newspaper in [Lebanon](#), where developments in Syria are closely watched.

"It also points to the possibility that Syria, by virtue of its strong ties with Iran, can mediate between Iran and the West over Tehran's nuclear program," he told The Associated Press.

Iran's crackdown on opposition protesters who claim the June presidential election was rigged has brought it international condemnation. But at the same time, analysts said Syria is quietly seeking to improve its image in the West after years of isolation.

The U.S. lists Syria as a state sponsor of terrorism and it was snubbed by the former Bush administration. Washington has long criticized Damascus for its support of radical Palestinian groups and the militant Shiite Hezbollah in Lebanon. The U.S. and [Iraq](#) say Syria does too little to stop the flow of foreign fighters across its border into Iraq. Syria says

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In this photo released by the semi-official Iranian Fars News Agency, French lecturer Clotilde Reiss, who was reportedly arrested at Tehran airport on July 1, and jailed on charges of spying linked to riots over last month's presidential election, seen at the court room in Tehran, Iran, Saturday, Aug. 8, 2009. Dozens of opposition activists and protesters stood trial in Tehran Saturday on charges of rioting and plotting to topple the ruling Islamic system following the disputed presidential election, Iran's state media reported. (AP Photo/LNA Hanif Shoae) EDITORS NOTE AS A RESULT OF AN OFFICIAL IRANIAN GOVERNMENT BAN ON FOREIGN MEDIA COVERING SOME EVENTS IN IRAN, THE AP WAS PREVENTED FROM INDEPENDENT ACCESS TO THIS EVENT (Hanif Shoae - AP)

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it is doing what it can and demands the U.S. and Iraq do more to control the Iraqi side of the border.

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But Syria's mediation with Iran comes at a time of thawing relations with the U.S. and France. A U.S. military delegation arrived in the country Wednesday for talks on how to stem the movement of foreign fighters into Iraq. That follows visits by several U.S. officials recently as part of the Obama administration's diplomatic outreach to the country.

No specifics were released about what exactly Syria did to aid in Afshar's release and Syria's Foreign Ministry would not comment on Wednesday.

However, this was not the first time Syria has played mediator with Iran. During Lebanon's 1975-90 civil war, when Syria dominated Lebanon, Damascus helped secure the release of American, French and British hostages held by pro-Iranian Shiite militants in Lebanon. In fact, some hostages often were released in Lebanon and taken to the Foreign Ministry in Damascus in a clear sign that Syria had arranged the deal.

Syrian political analyst Imad Shueibi said the country's role in freeing Afshar "gives an impression that Syria is essential to bring about stability in the region." He said Syria has also played a significant role in improving Iran's relations with Arab countries.

Saab said the latest gesture was evidence of close ties between France and its former colony Syria. French President Nicolas Sarkozy has strengthened ties with Damascus in recent months, visiting the country twice.

Ibrahim Bayram, a political analyst with Lebanon's An-Nahar daily, said Syria is poised to play a bigger role in improving Iran's relations with the West strained over Tehran's nuclear program.

"By helping in the French woman's release, Syria wanted to send a message to the West in general that it is ready to help in settling hot issues in the region," he said. "No doubt, Syria is using its alliance with Iran to improve its image in the world and break its international isolation."

The U.S. and the West want Iran to suspend uranium enrichment, a process that can be used to produce fuel for both nuclear energy and nuclear weapons. Washington and other countries suspect the Iranian nuclear program is geared toward weapons production.

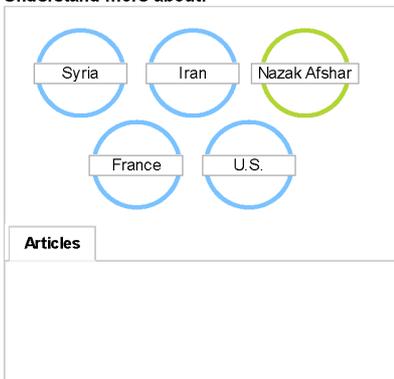
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