



CONFERENCE REPORT

IRAN - RUSSIA A Backgrounder

by Antonino Occhiuto

International support was key to ensure that Syria's President, Bashar Al-Assad, survived the country's civil war. Russia and Iran have both intervened in the conflict and tipped the balance in favour of their main ally in the Arab Levant. Iran-backed militias such as Hezbollah and Russia's full-scale military intervention, effectively avoided the collapse of the depleted Syrian army, thus preventing regime change in Damascus.

The Tehran-Moscow partnership is a relatively new phenomena. This is because the Islamic revolution in Iran gave birth to a regime that was both anti-Soviet and anti-American. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has supported Iran when the Kremlin's relations with the West deteriorated. Significantly, in 2015, Putin lifted a ban— imposed by his predecessor—to sell S-300 and other sophisticated weaponry to Iran. The cooperation to defeat anti-government forces during the Syrian Civil War has certainly required an unprecedented level of contact between Moscow and Tehran. However, so far, there is no signal that bilateral cooperation is likely to survive the tactical, short term focus on the survival of the Assad regime. In the long term, Russian and Iranian objectives differ in a substantial way. This will plunge the Moscow-Tehran strategic relation in Syria in dangerously uncharted waters.

Moscow's ultimate objectives include preventing regime change, promoting Russian influence in the Arab Levant—with an eye on the Mediterranean—as well as keeping its military bases in Syria. Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, is internationally regarded as the kingmaker when it comes to the Syrian dossier. Putin hopes this may encourage the United States to recognise Russia as an equal partner in the region. While Moscow considers Assad to be Syria's legitimate leader, Putin's main interest lies in preserving Syrian state institutions rather than Assad personally. Arguably, Russia could even accept Assad's departure as long as it occurred as part of an overall peace process which resulted in a strengthened Syrian state firmly in Moscow's sphere. Russia is also keen to reduce its military burden and is looking for partners to find political solutions and start the reconstruction process in the war-torn country. Such partners could include countries in the West, but also some of Tehran's regional adversaries such as Israel and the Gulf Arab States.

Tehran, in contrast, is unwilling to sanction Assad's departure and believes that keeping the Syrian leader—crucially a member of the Iran-aligned Alawite religious sect—in power remains central to accomplishing its main objectives: maintaining its ability to supply its long-time proxy militia in Lebanon, Hezbollah, with weaponry, while building a land corridor from Iran to the Mediterranean. Tehran fears that a new government in Damascus may not be as loyal to them as the Assad regime and therefore may not be willing to accommodate such grand scheme. Iran believes that its presence in Syria is critical to Tehran's ability to confront Israel. Iran wants to retain the ability to strike at Israel from both Lebanon and Syria, hence Iran's determination to maintain a presence on the ground via proxy militias linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Iran's IRGC plans to turn its Syrian proxies into an institutionalised force similar to Hezbollah in Lebanon, a measure that conflicts directly with Russia's desire to build up the capabilities of the Syrian state under its own exclu-

sive influence. For instance, and problematically for Tehran, Moscow has, so far, failed to take a stance with regards to Israel's frequent, crippling air strikes against Iranian military assets inside Syria.

Cooperation between Russia and Iran goes certainly beyond their joint war efforts in Syria. Both countries are under US sanctions and are seeking to increase their trade relations. The two countries signed comprehensive energy deals in 2017, including an oil-for-goods agreement worth up to \$20 billion USD and a series of agreements for Russian energy majors to develop Iran's oil and gas industries. Furthermore, Russia is a staunch supporter of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action a.k.a. the Iran Nuclear Deal, and has been historically willing to support Tehran's non-military nuclear energy programme. In Syria, however, the Tehran-Moscow alliance is beginning to manifest all its weaknesses, as both countries aim to a unique dominant position, in a way that could open a Pandora box of strategic divergences in the larger region. Russia's Syria involvement can be regarded as a pragmatic decision: Iran was not able to prop-up the Moscow friendly Assad regime on its own and Russian policymakers wanted to prevent the return of Russian foreign fighters, fuelling conflict in the Caucasus. The Ayatollahs pushed for partnership with Putin as Iran believes Russia's Middle East engagement is only short term. Due to societal opposition, Russia cannot keep large ground forces in Syria while Iran can. Such significant military presence on the ground grants to Tehran the strongest leverage over the Assad regime. But, both Iranian militias and Assad continue to rely on Russian military and political protection.

Beyond Syria, there are at least two other world regions in which the interests of Moscow and Tehran may collide. These are the Caucasus-Caspian region and Central Asia. Russia is keen to keep the status quo in both as it fears any change in government and in the intra-state dynamics. Russia and Iran can only be on the same page in those regions as long as Tehran does not support change or status quo revision.

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