

## **Iran-Russia-Syria: A Threefold Cord is not Quickly Broken**

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There are a number of reasons why Iran has almost no allies at the state level. The regime in Tehran, led by religious figures with a radical approach, differs from the regimes elsewhere in the region. More than any other country, it is identified as a Shiite state and leader of the Shiite camp that threatens the Sunni camp. It is perceived as seeking to undermine other regimes. Its strategic goal is to achieve hegemony in the Middle East, in order to influence important regional developments, limit threats to its security, and overpower its rivals. For that purpose, it is involved in the affairs of other states, operating terrorists and building nonconventional military strength that endangers the rest of the region. Since the Islamic Revolution, it has cut off relations with its friends, including the United States, the superpower that supported it, and Israel.

### **The Iran-Syria Axis**

The only country that could be defined as an ally of Iran is Syria, under the control of the Assad family, father and son. This alliance was formed after the Iranian revolution – a long alliance in Middle East terms. One of the cornerstones of this alliance is Iran's belief that the survival and stability of the Assad regime are essential to it. As Iran sees it, there is no substitute for the Assad regime, because Syria gives it the link to Lebanon, and together they are building Hezbollah as a Shiite organization that promotes its influence in Lebanon and creates a front that threatens Israel. Syria also shares Iran's

hostile approach to the United States. These are the reasons why for many years Iran has invested money, military aid, weapons, and oil in Syria.

The upheaval in the Arab world since 2010 has had enormous influence on Iran's regional status and activity. It poses some dangers for Tehran, of which the most important concerns the future of the Assad regime. Although with the help of Iran and Russia Assad's position improved during 2017, the stability of his regime is not yet assured and its future is unclear. Even if the regime does stabilize, it will not be the same regime or the same Syria. It will be more dependent on Iran, and it will also consume more human and economic resources. Overall, Syria's current severe distress and its inability to deal with this crisis on its own weakens the Iran-Syria axis.

Since the start of the Syrian civil war, Iran has invested massive resources to provide military and economic aid to the Assad regime. Iran's military intervention in Syria has increased dramatically since 2014, and particularly since September 2015, when Iran sent thousands of fighters from the Quds Force and ground troops from the Revolutionary Guards and the regular Iranian army to Syria. But the main component of the forces sent by Iran consists of thousands of fighters from Hezbollah and the Shiite militias that it built, or helped to build in Iraq, and volunteer Shiite units from Afghanistan and Pakistan. By mid-2017 Iranian forces and Shiite militias had suffered over 2,000 casualties in battles in Syria, which led to internal criticism of Iran's involvement in Syria and the price of this activity, even though the vast majority of the fighters and the casualties came from the militias.

At the same time, the dangers to the Assad regime offered opportunities and benefits to Iran. At this stage, the regime is not at immediate risk of collapse, and Iran's military presence in Syria ensures its ongoing influence there and preserves its interests. Moreover, Iran is building a sphere of control and influence between Iraq and Syria, and from there to Lebanon by means of Hezbollah and the Shiite militias, which will enable it to continue strengthening Hezbollah while using it to widen the front against Israel in southern Lebanon to the Golan Heights. However, creating this space, which is known as the "corridor," presents numerous problems and risks to Iran, mainly because any movement there, so far from Iran, could expose the forces to Israeli or American attacks.

Iran has other achievements. Its military cooperation with Russia has bolstered its regional status, notwithstanding their disagreements and mutual suspicions. Iran is perceived in the international arena as having positive

influence in the struggle against the Islamic State and on future arrangements in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, the Arab world is enmeshed in its own weakness and difficult internal problems, and is unable to organize against the Iranian threat. Today there is no regional element that can block or balance Iran, such as Iraq during Saddam Hussein's rule. Although Saudi Arabia has shown increasing determination to deal with Iranian regional activity, this applies mainly to Iranian involvement in Yemen and Bahrain, which is highly troubling to Riyadh. Activity opposing Tehran is far less obvious with respect to Iranian involvement in Syria. Under the Obama presidency, the United States was also perceived as hard pressed to face the Iranian challenge. While the Trump administration presumably is eager to isolate and weaken Iran, which it sees as a serious threat to its regional interests, how successful it will be in this respect remains an open question.

### **The Iran-Russia Axis**

Relations between Iran and Russia are overshadowed by a long tradition of mutual fear and suspicion, going back hundreds of years. Until the 1990s, Iran was worried that Russia might invade Iran as a way of reaching the Gulf. This concern was realized in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when Russia, and then the Soviet Union, invaded northern Iran and Afghanistan, and some of the territory seized by Russia – in the Azerbaijan area – has never returned to Iran. In the previous century Iran was also worried about communist subversion in its territory, through the Iranian communist party, the Tudeh. These fears lessened considerably following the collapse of the Soviet Union, because the worry regarding communist subversion in Iran declined and Russia no longer shares a border with Iran. Moreover, since 1989 Russia has become a primary supplier of weapons to Iran, and in the 1990s it made an important contribution to the Iranian nuclear program. It also withdrew its forces from Afghanistan, and thus helped to mitigate some of Iran's suspicions about its intentions.

Since 2012 Iran and Russia have grown even closer. This was reflected in numerous top level meetings between the two countries, Russia's political support for the Iranian position, expansion of their economic links, and talks on the provision of additional Russian aid to broaden the Iranian nuclear program. But above all, this closeness is reflected in military cooperation between the two countries in Syria, with the aim of strengthening the Assad regime, and in the talks to finalize a large weapons deal, following the

significant decline in the supply of Russian weapons to Iran after the mid 1990s.

There are a number of reasons for this increased closeness. The turmoil in the Middle East poses risks for both countries and has encouraged them to expand their cooperation, particularly in the provision of assistance to the Assad regime and the common struggle against the Islamic State. Iran's growing influence, and the legitimacy it received in the international arena with the nuclear agreement, encouraged Russia to expand its ties with Iran, particularly since the removal of many of the sanctions imposed on Iran allowed it to extend their economic links. At the same time, Russia wants to increase its influence in the Middle East, and Iran can help it do so. Iran was also worried about the power and presence of the United States in the region, and the tensions between Russia and the US helped draw Russia and Iran closer.

Among their spheres of cooperation, the most important one at present is the military intervention in Syria, involving Russian and Iranian forces. Russia has recognized the legitimacy of Iran's intervention in Syria. Based on a shared interest in the stability and survival of the Assad regime, Russia and Iran divided up their activity in Syria. Russia's contribution to the fighting consists of aerial attacks and advanced military technology, while Iran contributes ground troops, particularly from Hezbollah and the Shiite militias it has set up, led by officers and units from the Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force.

In the long range there is the weapons deal discussed by the two governments. If it comes to fruition, it could be the largest deal ever signed between them, and it will renew Iran's aging weapons repository, particularly its aircraft array, which at present consists entirely of outdated American, Russian, and Chinese planes. The main obstacle to the deal is a Security Council resolution that bans the supply of weapons to Iran until 2020, although Iran has also not signed a large weapons deal with Russia since the 1990s – apart from the agreement to supply S-300 air defense systems – given financial difficulties. But it appears that this hurdle will not prevent finalizing the future deal, perhaps also because the removal of sanctions on Iran as part of the nuclear agreement will enable it to sign the deal.

However, Russia and Iran are divided by disagreements and conflicts over important issues, deriving from the differences between their interests and their goals. Russia is a superpower, and naturally its relationships,

constraints, and priorities are different from those of Iran, while Iran is a regional power with its own objectives, which sometimes counter Russian goals. Thus, the Iranians apparently have reservations over the increasing importance of Russia in the Middle East, where it has taken over leadership of the Syrian crisis, and is playing a central role in determining the moves and possible resolution in Syria, while until now Iran was the leading external actor in Syria. Iran is also worried by the possibility that Russia will be willing to sacrifice Assad's rule in the framework of a settlement with the United States, if there is no choice. While it is true that both Iran and Russia have a shared interest in saving the Assad regime, for Iran this is a vital interest, while for Russia it is important but not vital, and it will be ready for a settlement without Assad as long as its most important interests in Syria are maintained, including continued use of marine services in the port of Tartus.

In the past, under American pressure, Russia acted against Iran's interests. In the second half of the 1990s, in the framework of an agreement with the United States, Russia froze all arms sales to Iran for a few years. Even after cancelling this agreement under Putin, for several years Russia froze implementation of the agreement to supply the S-300 air defense system to Iran. Russia also voted several times in the Security Council in favor of sanctions on Iran in the context of its nuclear program. Although these were milder sanctions, the very fact that Russia supported them worried Tehran. Russia's good relations with Israel are also not to Iran's liking, particularly if Russia takes Israel's interests into account – mainly regarding the situation in Syria – and objects to Iranian moves that harm Israel.

Therefore, Iran and Russia wish to extend their cooperation in the areas of weapons supply, economic ties, and investment in the Iranian nuclear program. But apart from these important ties, there is no alliance between them. As far as is known, there is no Russian commitment to support Iran in key issues. Considerations regarding relations with the United States are very important to Russia, for better or worse, their objectives for the future of Syria are not identical to those of Iran, and there is still a significant degree of suspicion in their relations.

### **Significance for Israel**

The military presence of Iran and its proxies in Syria creates a threat to Israel, both because of the risk of the situation degenerating into armed conflict,

whether intentional or accidental, and because inter alia it is designed to strengthen Hezbollah against Israel. This presence is expected to continue for some time and could become part of the Iranian aim of expanding the front with Israel, through Hezbollah, from south Lebanon and the Golan Heights. A stronger Hezbollah means swifter ground movement along the corridor from Iraq to Syria and Lebanon, and the establishment of factories to produce weapons in Syria and Lebanon. This extended front will also likely involve other Shiite militias from among those brought by Iran to fight in Syria, particularly the Iraqi militias that have links to Iran and experience of fighting American forces in Iraq from the previous decade. On the other hand, placing militias linked to Iran – and certainly Iranian forces – in Syria, close to the border with Israel, would require Iran to be restrained and very cautious, because such a situation would give Israel additional opportunities to attack Iranian objectives.

Hezbollah absorbed relatively heavy losses while fighting in Syria, but at the same time acquired important military experience, including the operation of larger units than in the past, and this experience could be of use in possible future fighting against Israel. Iran too has acquired important combat experience, after it had not engaged in warfare since the end of its war against Iraq in 1988.

The weapons deal that is on the agenda with Russia, the largest weapons deal signed between the two countries since 1989, is significant. It would renew and upgrade the arms in Iranian hands, which have not been renewed since the mid-1990s – and above all, it would upgrade the aircraft of the Iranian air force. It could also enable Iran to transfer new weaponry to Hezbollah and other Shiite militias.

On the other hand, boosting the military ties between Iran and Russia, intensifying Iran's presence in Syria, and implementing the weapons deal mentioned above could be expected to increase the sense of the Iranian threat in the eyes of other states in the region, chiefly Saudi Arabia. A growing sense of the Iranian threat could cause these countries to be more interested in quiet talks with Israel on the question of blocking Iran. This development could also lead the Trump administration to intensify its efforts to put a stop to Iran's regional activity.