

# Will Russia and Iran Walk Hand in Hand?

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Since 2012 relations between Russia and Iran have improved significantly. This warming of relations can be seen in a series of visits and meetings between leaders and senior figures from the two countries, significant cooperation and coordination of military activities in Syria, and plans for the substantial expansion of connections regarding weapons supply, nuclear infrastructure, economic ventures, and trade.

Iran's relations with Russia have fluctuated over the years. During the reign of the Shah, Iran perceived the Soviet Union as the greatest threat – a historic threat stemming from Iranian fears that the Soviet Union intended to take over parts of Iran, as it did in the nineteenth century and for short periods in the twentieth century, and as it did in Afghanistan. This threat was also fed by the fact that Iran was then a central ally of the United States, and from the fear in Iran that communism would overrun its borders. However, in the late 1980s, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and Iran's urgent need for arms following its heavy losses in the war with Iraq, relations with Russia changed significantly. From 1989 Russia became Iran's main arms supplier, and since 1995 it has been a central player in the construction of Iran's nuclear infrastructure. This change also reflected a decline in Iran's level of suspicion toward Russia, due to the collapse of the communist bloc, the departure of Russian forces from Afghanistan, and the disappearance of the shared border between Iran and Russia, which are now separated by the southern republics that gained independence with the breakup of the Soviet Union. Yet notwithstanding these developments, tensions between the two sides continued. Russia's arms supply to Iran was concentrated in the years 1989-1995, and thereafter

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declined significantly; in addition, Russia did not agree to some of the Iranian requests for higher quality weapon systems. There were likewise tensions relating to the nuclear issue – especially when the construction of the reactor in Bushehr by the Russians took many years longer than planned, which led to serious allegations by the Iranians.

Strengthened relations between Russia and Iran are the result of a number of regional and global developments. The risks and problems for both Russia and Iran presented by the turbulence in the Middle East have prompted them to expand cooperation. Both countries view stabilizing the Assad regime and contending with the Islamic State as critically important, with Russia seeing Iran as a counterweight to the threat of Sunni radicalism. At the same time, Iran's growing influence in Syria and Iraq and in the Middle East in general, and the international legitimacy it gained with the nuclear agreement, has increased its importance from Russia's perspective as well. Moreover, the lifting of the nuclear-related sanctions allows Russia to expand its economic relations with Iran, and perhaps also to renew its arms supply. In tandem, the Ukraine crisis and the Western sanctions imposed on Russia in the wake of the crisis have spurred Russia to flex its muscles in the Middle East, especially at a time when the Obama administration is seen as demonstrating weakness in the Middle East, which leaves an opening for both Russia and Iran to make gains in the region.

The impact of these developments highlights the shared interests of Iran and Russia in the framework of their Middle East policies. They do not have true allies in the Middle East – apart from Iran's close relationship with the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and other Shiite militias – and therefore each side relies on the other to advance shared interests. Both aim to diminish US involvement and influence in the Middle East and to highlight American weaknesses. Iran does not have an alternative to the supply of high quality weapons from Russia, and it seeks Russian nuclear assistance. Meanwhile, Russia seeks Iranian assistance in stabilizing the region and preventing unrest in the Caucasus. And beyond aid to the Assad regime, Russia and Iran have other shared regional interests, including distrust of Turkey and the campaign against extremist organizations in Afghanistan.

However, alongside these shared interests are conflicting interests on central issues. Russia's global and regional interests and priorities, which are different from those of Iran, at times lead to Russian actions that harm Iran's interests. For example, Russia voted four times in the Security Council in favor of imposing sanctions on Iran – albeit softened sanctions – due

to the nuclear issue. In addition, Iranians have harbored deep distrust toward Russia for generations, including concerns about Russia's efforts to expand its influence in the region, in part at the expense of Iran. And while perception of the Russian threat on the part of Iran has diminished over time, having been replaced by the American threat, a residue of distrust toward Russia and its intentions remains among the Iranian leadership.

Thus, shared interests coupled with mutual tension are reflected in two of the central issues on the Russia-Iran agenda: the civil war in Syria and Russia's provision of weapons to Iran.

### **The Syrian Crisis**

The connection between the Iranian regime and the Assad regime has existed since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and the stability and survival of the Assad regime is a strategic interest of the utmost importance for Iran. From Tehran's perspective, there is no substitute for the Assad regime, and its collapse would seriously harm the Iran-Iraq-Syria-Lebanon axis, and particularly the Iran-Hezbollah-Lebanon connection and the Iranian front against Israel. Due to the indispensability of the connection with the Assad regime, since 2012 Iran has invested much effort in aiding its survival – with money, weapons, and participation in the fighting. These efforts peaked in 2015, when Iran dispatched 3000 fighters from the ranks of the Revolutionary Guards – from the ground forces of the Guards as well as the Quds Force – to aid Assad's army in the war. Toward the same end, Iran effected the deployment in Syria of a significant force of 4,000-5,000 Hezbollah fighters, as well as Shiite militias under Iranian influence from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Russia too has an even older connection to the Assad regime, although the special security and military ties that characterized the relationship from the 1960s disappeared following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia sees importance in a connection with Syria, a major Arab country, as a means for a significant power base on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean. What tipped the scale in favor of military involvement in the Syrian civil war was the appearance of Sunni jihadist organizations in the Syrian arena, and the threat they posed for the Assad regime. Yet from Russia's perspective, beyond the importance of Assad's survival is the stability of the Syrian regime, which contributes to the creation of a new order in the Middle East that strengthens Russia's international standing, widens its influence in the region, and diminishes Western dominance. This new

order could also aid Russia in lessening the economic pressure placed on it by the West in the wake of the Ukraine crisis.

In 2014, with increased tension between Russia and the US over Ukraine, Russia's interest in strengthening its cooperation with Iran increased in general, and regarding Syria in particular. Russia saw this cooperation as a way to overcome its isolation and eyed Syria as an arena for economic investment, especially regarding construction of nuclear reactors and increased weapon sales. Iran, meanwhile, saw Russia as an important partner in stabilizing the Assad regime. This shared interest led to coordinated Russian and Iranian military intervention in September 2015, with the aim of empowering and stabilizing the Assad regime. It seems that the two countries succeeded in dividing up responsibilities, with Russia contributing military technology and firepower, mainly in the form of air strikes, while Iran contributed ground operations and military involvement by Hezbollah and Shiite militias.

Due to the improved state of the Assad regime since late 2015, and in the wake of the relatively high casualty rate among the Iranian forces in the fighting – at least 350 killed, including senior officers – Iran withdrew the majority of its forces from Syria in late 2015 (but apparently returned additional fighting forces to Syria in early April 2016). In March 2016, Russia too withdrew part of its airpower from Syria, but kept part of this force there – two air bases and two navy bases – as well as its command, control, and intelligence system and its maintenance infrastructure. For Russia, the decision to change the nature of its involvement in Syria stemmed primarily from its estimation that, with the enhancement of Assad's control over part of Syria, the main goals of the intervention were achieved. At the same time, both Russia and Iran maintain the ability to continue to provide military assistance to the Assad regime – Iran through ground warfare and Russia through air strikes.<sup>1</sup>

Russian and Iranian involvement in Syria demonstrates the similarities and differences in their approaches toward the situation. Both countries have a significant interest in the stability of the Assad regime, to the extent that they were willing to intervene militarily in the fighting. But from Iran's perspective, Assad's survival is of substantial importance, since any regime that would take its place would be much less convenient for Iran, perhaps even adversarial. In contrast, the Assad regime is important but not critical for Russia, and Russia is likely to continue to have relations with Syria even under a different regime, mainly via its military relations. It is important to

Russia that Syria end up with an arrangement accepted by the international community, even without Assad, as long as Russia retains its influence in Syria, including the maritime services that it receives at the port of Tartus, and as long as the arrangement contributes to the consolidation of Russia's status in the Middle East and in the international arena. If the price of such an arrangement in Syria is the removal of Bashar al-Assad, Russia might be willing to pay that price.

Russia has become the major player in determining the current order in Syria and in achieving the (currently precarious) ceasefire on the basis of a roadmap for ending hostilities and bringing about a transitional period to solve the crisis. Russia's achievement is largely due to its military involvement in the fighting, its success in improving the state of the regime, its connections with Assad, its activities with Iran, and its ability to engage with the American administration regarding the Syrian issue. However, it seems that Russia's enhanced standing vis-à-vis the arrangement in Syria is not to Iran's liking. Even though Iran's most important goal is the survival of the Assad regime – and Assad's situation has improved – the possibility of Russia sacrificing the regime as part of a future arrangement worries Iran. Mohammad Ali Jafari, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards, said in November 2015 that Russia intervened in Syria in order to serve its own interests and does not care whether Assad survives, as does Iran.<sup>2</sup>

The fate of the Assad regime has implications for the future of Syria in general. Russia prefers an arrangement accepted by the United States, and is willing to compromise on the establishment of a federation in Syria, on the condition that Moscow's interests are preserved. Iran likely understands that under the conditions that have developed, Syria will not continue to be what it once was, and an arrangement involving painful compromises will be necessary in order to rebuild a stable regime in Syria. But for the time being Iran insists on maintaining a central government in Syria headed by Assad, and rejects the possibility of a federation. Its opposition to a federation is also in part a fear that Kurdish autonomy in Syria would have an impact on the future of the Kurdish minority in Iran, especially because the Kurds achieved autonomy in Iraq beginning in the early 1990s.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, Russia's actions in the arena have overshadowed Iran's involvement. While Russia favored Iran's participation in diplomacy surrounding the Syrian issue, it has acted independently in the process, and does not appear as a partner of Iran. Iran has reservations regarding Russia's willingness to include the West and the Sunni countries in its efforts

to stabilize the political situation in Syria, and fears that a Russian-American arrangement would marginalize Iran.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the casualties suffered by Iranian ground forces in Syria – while Russian air forces suffered few casualties – aroused criticism in Iran regarding involvement in Syria, and forced the regime to explain how critical its military assistance to Syria is to Iran's interests. Complaints were also sounded on the Iranian side about inadequate coordination between the Russian air force and Syrian and Iranian forces, which contributed to Iranian casualties. It was reported that Russian warplanes did not assist Revolutionary Guards forces who were in distress in the Aleppo region in June 2016 and who were forced to bring in reinforcements from Iran and from Assad's army.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, Iran has reservations about the improved relations and high level talks between Russia and Israel, including President Putin's visits to Israel in 2005 and 2012 and Prime Minister Netanyahu's visits to Moscow. This is also connected to Syria. The military coordination between Russia and Israel at the level of deputy chiefs of staff since the start of Russia's intervention in Syria does not suit Iran. More importantly, this coordination is liable to obstruct Iran's efforts to establish an infrastructure in southern Syria for terrorist activity by Hezbollah against Israel, which would connect to the terrorist infrastructure in southern Lebanon.

### **Supply of Weapons from Russia to Iran**

The supply of weapons from Russia to Iran, a central issue in the bilateral relations, began after the Iran-Iraq War, when Iran lost around half of its weapons. Between 1989 and 1991 the two countries signed four weapons deals with a total value of approximately \$5 billion, consisting mainly of 24 MIG-29 aircraft, 12 Sukhoi-24 aircraft, SA-5 air defense systems, three submarines, T-72 tanks, and BMP-2 armored personnel carriers. The supply of most of the weapon systems was completed by the mid 1990s. Since then, Russia has supplied Iran with air defense systems, helicopters, and military equipment but only a small number of primary weapon systems, and there has also been a decline in new deals.

There is no doubt that for the past two decades, Iran has been interested in a comprehensive arms deal with Russia. A significant portion of Iran's weaponry is obsolete – especially the air force, which includes American warplanes that are over 40 years old, and Russian aircraft that are over 25 years old. In order to upgrade its weapon systems, Iran engaged in several rounds of negotiations with Russia with the aim of closing a major multi-

billion dollar weapons deal. However, these talks yielded few results, and Russia's supply of weapons to Iran decreased over the years.

There are two reasons for the decline in Russia's supply of weapons to Iran. One is financial: Iran lacked the monetary resources to fund new large weapons deals, given the need to recover from the damage incurred in the war with Iraq and to fund the weapons deals of the late 1980s. In this situation, Iran preferred to invest resources in its nuclear program and missile program, at the expense of its conventional forces, since the former were more important to it regarding deterrence against the United States and Israel, and because of the disappearance of the Iraqi military threat to Iran. The second reason is Russia's relations with the United States. During the 1990s the American administration placed heavy pressure on Russia to refrain from providing high quality weapons to Iran, claiming that such weapons would endanger American forces in the Middle East. Indeed, in 1994-95 an understanding was reached between the governments of the United States and Russia to the effect that Russia would complete the supply of weapons to Iran included in deals it had already signed, but would not sign new weapons deals. This agreement remained in force – albeit with limited violations – until 2000, when Russia cancelled it.

After 2000 the Russian government announced its intention to renew the supply of weapons to Iran. However, even then, the American administration continued to pressure the Russian government to refrain from supplying high quality weapons to Iran, and in certain instances it succeeded in deferring or limiting the implementation of weapons deals, as with the advanced S-300 anti-aircraft missile system. From the 1990s there were repeated requests by Iran to Russia to purchase the system, yet only in 2007 was a deal signed to supply it. Even then, Russia refrained from supplying the system for almost a decade, and began delivery only in March 2016.

The timing of the supply of the S-300 system is connected to the nuclear agreement (the JCPOA) and the lifting of sanctions against Iran. The JCPOA is also closely connected to the strengthening of military relations between Russia and Iran in general. In January 2015, before the agreement was signed, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Iran for the first time in 15 years. During his visit the two countries signed an agreement on military cooperation that included cooperation against terrorism, maritime exchanges, and Russian training for Iranian forces.<sup>6</sup>

A year later, in February 2016, Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan visited Moscow and discussed a large weapons deal with Russia. According

to reports in the Russian and Iranian media, the deal is worth \$8 billion, with the Iranians seeking to purchase Sukhoi SU-30 warplanes; advanced Yak-130 training jets, which can also be used as light attack aircraft; MI-8 and MI-17 helicopters; mobile coast-defense missile systems equipped with anti-ship cruise missiles; frigates, and submarines; T-90 tanks; and artillery. Iran is eager to receive Russian licenses to construct factories for the production of Russian weapon systems, including warplanes, helicopters, aircraft engines, and T-90 tanks. Iran has also expressed interest in acquiring the S-400 air defense system, which is more advanced than the S-300, but the assumption is that at least in the near future, Russia will not accede to the request.<sup>7</sup>

A few obstacles may stand in the way of a large deal. First, although it is possible that Iran is capable of financing such a deal after the lifting of sanctions, and although Russia's economic plight likewise makes the deal highly attractive, Iran's economic situation has not yet significantly improved following the lifting of the sanctions. Iran's government may prefer to use available resources for civilian needs, in order to prevent unrest stemming from disappointment with the economic situation. Even more important, according to the nuclear agreement, the UN Security Council has not yet lifted the sanctions on weapons sales to Iran, which are to remain in place until 2020, and Security Council approval is required for weapons sales. It is unlikely that the American administration and Western governments would agree to lift the prohibition, especially since Iran has continued testing missiles and aiding terrorism, despite the agreement.

However, there are signs that Russia and Iran may sign a large weapons deal, despite the prohibition and the challenges. In December 2015, the commander of Iran's ground forces said that his country will soon acquire T-90 tanks. In May 2016 Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that Russia will consider an Iranian request to acquire tanks, warplanes, and APCs, and that supply of the S-300 system would be completed by the end of 2016; in his eyes, the prohibition against the sale of such weapons to Iran has been lifted.<sup>8</sup>

### **Russia and Iran: Implications**

Military involvement in the fighting in Syria and talks on large scale weapons supply to Iran highlight the shared interests of Russia and Iran. Both countries are in need of and benefit from cooperation on these issues. Iran needs to upgrade its arsenal, and it has no alternative to the Russian weapons market

for obtaining high quality weapons. Russia is also interested in increasing its weapons exports and its investment in Iran's nuclear infrastructure, and it sees post-sanctions Iran as an opportunity. Iran feels that no country other than Russia would be as willing to aid it in stabilizing the situation in Syria; for its part, Russia is interested in Iran's military intervention to assist Russia in expanding its influence in Syria. Their joint activity in Syria has already proven itself and led to gains on the ground, even if rebel forces have not yet been defeated and a political arrangement is still far off. In addition, Russia and Iran seek each other's assistance to expand their influence in the region, while diminishing the US influence there, and Russia is able to aid Iran, at least to a limited extent, in coping with American pressure.

However, shared interests, and even practical cooperation, do not yet mean an alliance. The shared interests between Russia and Iran are limited, and Russia has yet to demonstrate a deep commitment to assist Iran with key issues. Both countries seek to stabilize the situation in Syria, but their goals are not identical. Both countries are likewise interested in furthering a large weapons deal, but the fact that such a deal has not been signed for over two decades indicates differences between them. The respective goals and the disputes between Russia and Iran over the years stem from different sets of regional and global considerations. For example, relations between Moscow and Washington are important to Russia, and as such, American pressure can influence Russia's stance on both Syria and the supply of weapons to Iran, such that an improvement in Russia's relations with the United States might prompt Moscow to refrain from – or at least delay or curtail – supplying high quality weapons to Iran. Russia also values its relationships with countries in the Middle East – including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel – to the dismay of Iran. And above all, there is considerable suspicion between Russia and Iran, mainly on the part of Iran toward Russia, stemming from disagreements on important issues and from Russian conduct that runs contrary to Iran's interests.

Iran's nuclear program is an important issue in the bilateral relations. Russia played a major role in building Iran's nuclear infrastructure, and Iran expects Russia to help it cope with American pressure, including on the nuclear issue. But there is no reason to assume that Russia is willing to accept Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons, given the negative consequences that such a development would have on stability in the Middle East. That said, Russia has thus far been unwilling to pressure Iran heavily, and it is

unlikely that Russia would hurry to join renewed sanctions on Iran should the American administration seek to take such a step. But if it were to become clear that Iran is violating the nuclear agreement and attempting to obtain nuclear weapons, Russia might join in pressuring Iran, especially if the United States would compensate it for this effort.

The bottom line is that there is room for improvement in Iran-Russia relations. They will presumably continue to cooperate regarding the situation in Syria, since their joint military activity has led to gains for both countries. At the same time, disputes are likely to arise from time to time, especially regarding the future of the Assad regime and the nature of the political arrangement that will come into place in Syria. In the immediate future Russia might refrain from supplying significant amounts of high quality weapons to Iran, even if it signs a new agreement, and will prefer to wait for the Security Council to remove restrictions on weapons sales to Iran.

Strengthened relations between Russia and Iran have a few implications for Israel – most of them negative. First, the high quality weapons Russia can supply to Iran pose risks for Israel. Especially important are the substantial upgrades expected to Iran's air force and air defense systems, and at a later stage Iran is liable to pass on high quality Russian-made weapon systems to Hezbollah. Since Iran intends, as usual, to request license from Russia to produce some of the weapon systems by itself, local production would contribute to the enhancement of Iran's military industry. However, American pressure, and perhaps Israeli appeals, may encourage Russian restraint in terms of the amount and quality of weapons supplied to Iran.

Second, an improvement in relations and cooperation between Russia and Iran would strengthen Iran's regional standing and might well weaken US influence. This is already apparent in the Syrian crisis, where Russia – and not the United States – is the party leading talks to stabilize the situation and reach an agreement, and along with Iran is leading a significant part of the fighting against jihadist organizations in Syria. For the past few years Iran has been strengthening its regional status – against the backdrop of its widened influence in Iraq, its military involvement in Syria, the signed nuclear agreement, and the weakened US posture. Tightened connections with Russia would further strengthen Iran's standing, while improving its military capabilities and expanding its nuclear infrastructure. And if in the coming years the Western governments demand renewed sanctions on Iran – in the event of a significant violation of the nuclear agreement, or

due to Tehran's expansion of its missile program – it may receive Russia's assistance in dealing with the sanctions.

Finally, the improvement of Russia-Iran relations has a positive aspect for Israel, though overshadowed by the negative implications. Due to Russia's perception of global considerations, the importance of its relations with the United States, and the talks it has held with Israel and moderate Arab countries, Russia could play a moderating role regarding Iran. Moreover, the military involvement of Russia and Iran in Syria could significantly damage the jihadist organizations in Syria, and Israel has an interest in restored stability in Syria, an internally strong central government in Damascus, and damage to organizations like the Islamic State.

## Notes

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