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Russia Stations Fighter Jets in Iran for Use in Syria

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On August 16, 2016, the governments of Russia and Iran announced that Russia deployed fighter jets at the Iranian airbase in Hamadan in western Iran, southwest of Tehran, and that the planes have already executed sorties against military targets of the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Fateh a-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) in Aleppo, Deir a-Zor, and Adlib, in Syria. The planes stationed are of two models: heavy long range bombers of the TU-22M3 model, and SU-34 bombers. The announcement did not specify how many bombers were deployed to Iran, or how long they could be expected to operate from Iranian soil.

This development is an important turning point. To date, the Iranians have allowed Russia to use their airspace for attacks in Syria as part of the military cooperation between the two states, which has grown tighter since September 2015. But Iran, in the post-Islamic Revolution era, has never allowed another country, especially not Russia, to station military troops on its soil, given Iran's lingering suspicions of Russian intentions. In the past, Russia posted military units elsewhere in the Middle East: it deployed battle squadrons and aerial defense units in Egypt in its war of attrition against Israel, and stationed air defense forces in Syria during the Yom Kippur and First Lebanon Wars. In the current crisis too, Russia has operated fighter jets from the Hmeimim air base near Latakia in Syria, but it is the first time has Russia operated planes from a base in Iran.

The direct cause of this development seems to be operational. To date, Russia has used its planes to help the Assad regime from its own bases in southern Russia and the Hmeimim base in Syria. The south Russian bases lies some 3,000 km from Syria, while flying the planes out of Hamadan cuts the route to Syrian targets down to only 700 km. The change means that the TU-22s can bear more ammunitions on each sortie, increasing payloads from 5-8 tons when flying out of Russia, up to 22 tons when flying out of Iran. The SU-34s cannot reach Syria from Russia without mid-air refueling.

Operationally, the development is an improvement, though not a dramatic change in Russian capabilities, as Russia could also have operated its heavy planes – as well as cruise missiles –from its own territory, and in any case, there is no critical operational

need for fighting in Syria. It may be that the timing of the deployment is connected to the deterioration of Assad's position and the rebels' achievements in the Aleppo region, which required an immediate response. It may also be that the change stems from the many losses incurred by the Revolutionary Guards and Iranian ground troops fighting in Syria, which led to Iranian complaints about insufficient Russian air force assistance in the Syrian civil war.

But it is more important to view the deployment of the planes from Iran as another step in the improvement of relations between Iran and Russia over the last five years, and especially in the last year. The improvement is evidenced by the many meetings between high ranking personnel on both sides, their cooperation in Syria to save the Assad regime, and – in the foreseeable future – a large arms deal, now under discussion, and close cooperation in the nuclear as well as economic and commercial fields. Indeed, Mikhail Bogdanov, Putin's special representative for the Middle East and Africa, met recently with the Iranian foreign minister for talks about further regional cooperation (which also touched on the Israel-Palestinian issue, in which Russia has recently taken a growing interest). It was also announced that President Putin will visit Iran this November. Furthermore, Russia is now in the midst of a large naval exercise in the Mediterranean and the Caspian Seas; it seems that the Iranians are participating in the Caspian part of the exercise.

A closer relationship between Russia and Iran, even after the deployment of Russian planes in Hamadan, neither translates into an alliance or treaty nor obviates opposed interests, different objectives, and disagreements and mutual suspicions, even when it comes to Syria. But the improvement does reflect shared interests, mutual needs, and common intentions to expand realms of cooperation in some key areas. In this sense, the stationing of the Russian planes on Iranian soil is of strategic importance: both Russia and Iran are using this to send a message to the United States and the West that they are the leading and most influential forces in the region, and that they are playing a central role in shaping the developing new order. For its part, the first US response to the Russian-Iranian move was low-keyed: official sources in Washington said that they have known for some time about Russia's intention to use an Iranian air base, although they didn't know exactly when it would happen, describing the move as "unfortunate though not surprising."

As to Turkey's position in the Russian-Iranian context, given its renewed closeness with Russia, challenging the United States: Turkey may be interested in becoming the third arm of a regional triangle alongside Russia and Iran. Should such a process mature, the results will challenge both the United States and Israel.

Operationally, flying the Russian planes out of Iran does not in and of itself have much effect on Israel. Either way, Russia is attacking jihadist organizations in Syria – a shared

Israeli interest – and it does not much matter to Israel if the planes take off from Russia, Syria, or Iran. Planes leaving Iran to fight in Syria should also not affect the operational coordination agreed upon between Russia and Israel. More important, however, is the overall context of the growing cooperation between Russia and Iran. Iran is already pushing for a large arms deal with Russia, which is liable to change important components in Iran's military capabilities. Although such arms supplies have been banned by UN Security Council resolutions for the next few years, Iran might try to exploit its hosting of the Russian planes to seal the deal. Furthermore, Russia's participation in the expansion of Iran's nuclear infrastructure, also under discussion between the two states, runs counter to Israel's interests.

