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Russian-Iranian Relations through the Prism of the Syrian Crisis

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ABSTRACT *Moscow is extremely interested in keeping Iran in the sphere of its influence. First of all, Iran's geostrategic position allows it to influence the situation in the Caspian Sea region, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East. This, in turn, compels Moscow to discuss a wide range of foreign policy issues with Tehran. Given the shared visions on how to handle most of these problems, the support of Iran is believed to be important to the success of Moscow's activities to restore and strengthen Russia's regional position after the fall of the Soviet Union. Finally, both Moscow and Tehran are interested in saving the remaining government institutions in Syria. This common task plays in favor of Russian-Iranian cooperation, although each country certainly has its own reasons for saving the remnants of the regime.*

Introduction

Since 2012, Russia and Iran have been undertaking serious efforts to improve their relations and bring them to a new level that would imply strategic partnership between them. In 2013-2015, the Russian authorities intensified their efforts to settle the Iranian nuclear issue. Moscow helped to facilitate Iran's negotiations with the international group of negotiators whereas Lavrov's 2012 proposals on the settlement of the nuclear issue laid the necessary ground for the resumption of talks. In this case, Russian motifs were determined by a number of factors. First of all, Iran armed with a nuclear bomb was not desirable for Moscow, as this would change the balance of power in the region and encourage other, even less stable, Middle Eastern regimes to join the nuclear club. Secondly, Russia believed that an unsettled nuclear issue could have hypothetically led to the destabilization of Iran as it created pretexts for a potential military conflict between the U.S. and Tehran. Under these circumstances the Kremlin did not want Iran to become another failed state near the border of the post-Soviet space in addition to Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Thirdly, Russia's role in the multilateral negotiations on the Iranian nuclear

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The Russian-Iranian interaction on Syria will have a long-lasting positive dynamic. However, there are factors that will not allow this dialogue to reach the level of a full-fledged military and political alliance

issue helped to promote Moscow's importance as a constructive international player. The latter was also important given the negative reaction of the international community to the annexation of Crimea and Russian support to the separatist forces in the East of Ukraine. Thus, Moscow's involvement in the negotiation process with Iran was considered by some U.S. analysts as one of the main factors that guaranteed the success of the negotiation process.[1] In July 2015, the U.S. President, Barack Obama, even telephoned Putin to thank him for Russia's role in reaching the P5+1 agreement with Iran.[2] Finally, by helping Tehran to settle the nuclear issue and lift international sanctions, Moscow was creating the positive image of Russia as a reliable partner. The latter brought obvious results by helping to revitalize Russian-Iranian relations.

Yet, in spite of strong mutual intention to bring the bilateral relations to a new level, the pace of their development obviously dissatisfies both sides. Thus, in spite of the positive media coverage, Rouhani's visit to Moscow (March 27-29, 2017) ended with very modest results. Most of the documents signed during the visit were either non-obligatory memorandums or supplementary agreements that were supposed to add some minor details to existing treaties. Moscow even refrained from promising the reciprocal visit of Putin to Tehran. The Iranian side was obviously disappointed by the absence of a breakthrough during these negotiations, although Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Javad Zarif, and the President of Iran Hassan Rouhani himself remained determined to seek further progress in Russian-Iranian relations.

The limited results of Rouhani's visit could be explained by several reasons. First of all, most of the economic projects discussed by Moscow and Tehran are still raw. Secondly, the Kremlin also wants to keep its relations with Tehran low-profile as it does not want to irritate other Russian partners in the region such as Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Finally, Russia simply does not believe that it should be in a hurry when dealing with Tehran. Trump's anti-Iranian rhetoric naturally pushes Iran towards Russia and keeps it in the sphere of Russian influence. Meanwhile the communalities in Russian and Iranian approaches to existing regional issues (such as the security of Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan; legal status of the Caspian Sea; cross-border crimes; Eurasian transit routes; situation in trans-Caucasia and Central Asia) can always ensure the minimal positive degree of bilateral dialogue. Under these circumstances, Moscow prefers to work on the improvement of bilateral relations thoroughly and without making rushed decisions.

This complexity of Russian-Iranian relations and the influence of the above-mentioned factors on their development found implicit reflection in the dialogue of the two countries over one (if not the main) key issue–the Syrian crisis. The expert community is still far from being unanimous regarding the nature of the Russian-Iranian dialogue on Syria. While some argue about the emergence of a strong regional alliance between Moscow and Tehran, others insist that cooperation between the two countries remains extremely fragile and predict the near end of the Russian-Iranian collaboration.[3] Who is right in the analysis of the nature of the Russian-Iranian dialogue on Syria? Both the opponents and supporters of the theory about the emergence of the Russian-Iranian alliance refer to the solid and real facts when proving their position. However, neither side is correct in its conclusions. The devil, as always, is in the details. For sure, the Russian-Iranian interaction on Syria will have a long-lasting positive dynamic. However, there are factors that will not allow this dialogue to reach the level of a full-fledged military and political alliance.

Should Iran and Russia Be Friends?

Indeed, the public opinion in Iran is not unanimous on the prospects of Tehran's cooperation with Russia. Moreover, there are even some Iranian policymakers and analysts who cautiously question the rationale behind Tehran's military involvement in Syria itself. However, these questions are raised within a certain (not very large) group of the Iranian political elite without reaching the national level of discussion. Thus, some members of the Iranian mid-class demonstrate certain fatigue from Tehran's active and obtrusive involvement in regional affairs. They believe that it would be much more reasonable for the government of their country to invest the money it spends, in Iraq, Palestine and Syria on the support of the pro-Iranian forces, in the Iranian economy that is experiencing difficult times. The message of these people to the authorities of Iran is simple: "stop feeding the foreigners at our expense."[4] However, these views are not openly supported by other Iranian policymakers.

Unexpectedly, Moscow is also criticized amongst the traditional supporters of Tehran's active role in the Syrian crisis –Iranian radical conservatives and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) members. These people believe that immense military efforts undertaken by Tehran in support of the Assad regime have bought the Iranian authorities the right to decide the destiny of Syria. Indeed, Iran deployed its military advisors and military forces in Syria long before Putin's decision to deploy Russian warplanes in Khmeimim and send special operation units to Syria. Tehran's proxies (such as Lebanese Hezbollah and the Shia militia) were the first to come to help Assad, as well. Moreover, even after commencing the Russian air raids, Moscow still tries to play the role of the third side in the conflict by flirting with the legal opposi-

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov (C) and his Iranian and Syrian counterparts, Zarif (R) and Muallem (L), hold a joint press conference in Moscow on April 14, 2017 after their talks about the U.S. strike on Assad's forces following a suspected chemical weapons attack.

AFP PHOTO / ALEXANDER NEMENOV

tion in Syria and occasionally distancing itself from Assad. At the same time, Iran has been clearly positioning itself as the loyal ally of the regime from the very beginning of the civil war in Syria. In addition to the military assistance provided by Tehran, the Islamic authorities have been supporting the Assad's regime materially and financially: during the most difficult periods for Damascus from 2013 to 2014, Iran provided Damascus with money to pay the salary of the Syrian army while the Syrian economy was fueled by Iranian petrol and energy resources.[5] The Iranian military advisors trained the Syrian army for urban fighting whereas their civil colleagues helped the Syrian administration to build the effective war-time economy.[6]

Consequently, the Russian direct military involvement in the conflict creates serious concerns among the Iranian military elite. They are afraid that Moscow can "steal" the Iranian victory in Syria. Shortly after the beginning of the Russian military operation, the pro-IRGC media outlets of Iran started to argue that the Russian air raids and the huge psychological effect from them could make the Syrian regime forget about the Iranian input in the survival of Assad during the previous years. As a result, Tehran might not play the role it really deserves in determining the future of post-conflict Syria. Apart from that, some Iranian media outlets called upon the Iranian authorities to not trust Russia and argued that Moscow can easily betray them and might simply trade off its support of Damascus for the increased investments from the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf. The active contacts between Russia and the GCC only strengthened these concerns.[7] Thus, in October 2015, the IRGC

commander, Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari openly questioned the loyalty of Moscow to Damascus by saying that Iran is much more concerned with Assad's destiny than Russia.[8]

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Yet, the last word in determining Tehran's approach to Syria and Russia does not belong to the above-mentioned groupings. It is the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, who takes the final decisions on all sensitive political questions (and the Syrian issue is one of these). During his meeting with Vladimir Putin in November 2015, he gave the green light for the Iranian cooperation with Russia on Syria. This decision was largely supported by the moderate conservatives who dominate the political life of the country. Thus, immediately after Putin's trip to Tehran the advisor on international affairs to the Supreme Leader, Ali Akbar Velayati (who is deeply involved in the Iranian diplomacy on Syria) formulated the official point of view on Russian-Iranian cooperation that became widely accepted in the Iranian political establishment. He argued that the Iranian authorities are determined to have "continuous and long-lasting cooperation with Russia" on Syria.[9] According to Velayati, "Russian efforts aimed at the settlement of the Syrian issue are completely coordinated with Iran. Occasionally [in the past] Russia and Iran had conflicting views on some aspects of the problem, but, finally, the two countries have managed to agree on them as well."[10] In order to emphasize the depth of the Russian-Iranian cooperation the politician also mentioned that, after Putin's visit to Tehran, the commander of the al-Quds Force (an IRGC division responsible for extraterritorial military operations including those in Syria) Qasem Soleimani could become a frequent guest to Moscow facilitating "the exchange of information" between Russia and Iran on Syria.[11]

After November 2015, the majority of Iranian news agencies were unanimous in their positive coverage of the Russian military involvement in Syria. Irrespective of their political preferences, the main news outlets of the Islamic republic argued that the Russian military deployment was necessary to save the Assad regime, they differed only in their emphasis. Thus, while the official and conservative news agencies (such as FARS, IRNA and IRIB) spoke about the Russian military involvement in positive and extremely passionate tones, the reformist newspapers such as *Mardom Salari*, *Arman* and *Iran* were more balanced in their judgments periodically reminding their readers that the Russia cooperation with Iran in Syria is driven exclusively by Moscow's pragmatism and not by the partnership obligations.[12] Nevertheless, Tehran's decision to work together with Russia was also the result of –this time Iranian– pragmatism.

Global Plans that Bring Together

The geostrategic factor has seriously favored the strengthening of the Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria. For Tehran, the beginning of Moscow's military involvement in the Syrian affairs finally gave the Iranian authorities what they had been looking for the last decade: a solid political and military base for the development of bilateral relations. Since the 2000s, Tehran was looking for a leading world power that could be a counterweight to the U.S. pressure on Iran. Traditionally, Russia was one of, if not the most preferred candidate for this role. Yet, during the last two decades, any Iranian attempts to win Moscow support ended up with failure. The Kremlin cooperated with Tehran only on a case by case basis and closely watched that this cooperation never reached the level where it could negatively affect the development of the Russian dialogue with the West or other countries of the Middle East. Even when Moscow occasionally blocked some of the U.S. moves against Iran or took measures to mitigate the negative effect from them, these Russian efforts were largely determined not by the partner obligations of Moscow to Tehran, but by the pragmatism of the Kremlin that used Iran to reach its own goals. Moreover, until 2012, Moscow many times sacrificed its good relations with Tehran in order to improve its ties with the U.S. and the EU.

Thus, in 1995, Russia and the U.S. signed the so-called Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement. According to this confidential document, signed in the wake of reconciliation between Moscow and Washington, the Russian government agreed to stop the implementation of existing military-supply contracts with Iran by 1999 and not to conclude new deals with Tehran in this field. The U.S. authorities, in their turn, were expected to develop cooperation with Russia's military-industrial complex while halting unauthorized provision of American military equipment to both the Middle East and the countries bordering Russia. In addition to this treaty, Moscow decided in 1998 not to implement its contract for the supply of a research reactor to Tehran. The reason for this decision was the same as in the 1995 agreement: the need to bridge relations with Washington. The subsequent tensions between Washington and Moscow during the first years of the new millennium were accompanied by the improvement of Russo-Iranian dialogue. In 2000, Putin and the then-president of Iran, Mohammad Khatami, met in New York, which led to the Iranian president making an official visit to Moscow in March 2001.

In 2001, both Khatami and Putin positioned their negotiations as the beginning of a new chapter in Russian-Iranian relations. It is necessary to admit that the rapprochement between the two countries was determined not only by their difficult relations with Washington. The substantial role in bridging relations between the two countries was played by Khatami's firm intention to implement his doctrine of "the dialogue of civilizations" –Khatami's cultural

and diplomatic strategy that implied the development of contacts between Shia Iran and countries with different religions and traditions. On the Russian side, Putin's plan to develop Russian ties with non-Western countries as a part of his doctrine of the multi-polar world also pushed the two countries towards each other. In the early 2000s, the Russian president for the first time formulated this idea that Moscow should not be solely focused on its dialogue with the U.S. and Europe but try to have equally intense relations with the countries of the Middle East, Asia and South America. And Iran was one of those non-Western countries that seemed to be appealing for Russia as a potential partner within the framework of the multi-polar world doctrine.

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Yet, the tense relations with the U.S. still remained the main factor determining the dynamics of the Russian-Iranian rapprochement of the early 2000s. Thus, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and subsequent improvement of both the U.S.-Russian and U.S.-Iranian relations slowed down the tempo of the interaction between Moscow and Tehran. It was again intensified after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 when both Russia and Iran were dissatisfied with the U.S. decision to occupy the country. Nevertheless, the U.S.-Russian reset of 2009 once again offset the Russian-Iranian dialogue compelling Moscow to adopt a harsher stance on Tehran and its nuclear program.

However, even under these circumstances, Russia still remained the most appealing candidate for the Iranian authorities as a potential counterweight to the U.S. influence in the Middle Eastern region. Tehran's attempts to use China for this role, undertaken in the late 2000s-early 2010s, obviously failed. Initially, the Iranians expected that intensive economic and investment cooperation with Beijing would boost the building of the Iranian-Chinese political alliance. Nevertheless, in spite of all Iranian efforts, China did not want to lose its neutral status in Middle Eastern affairs. Even more than Russia, Beijing tried to avoid forming any alliances that could spoil its good relations with any other countries of the region. Moreover, in most difficult situations related to Iran the Chinese authorities preferred to follow after Russia.[13] By 2012, this naturally returned Iran to the idea of building closer relations with Moscow.

Even the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Actions (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1 group that substantially eased Iranian relations with the West did not change the plans of Tehran to use Moscow. Statements made

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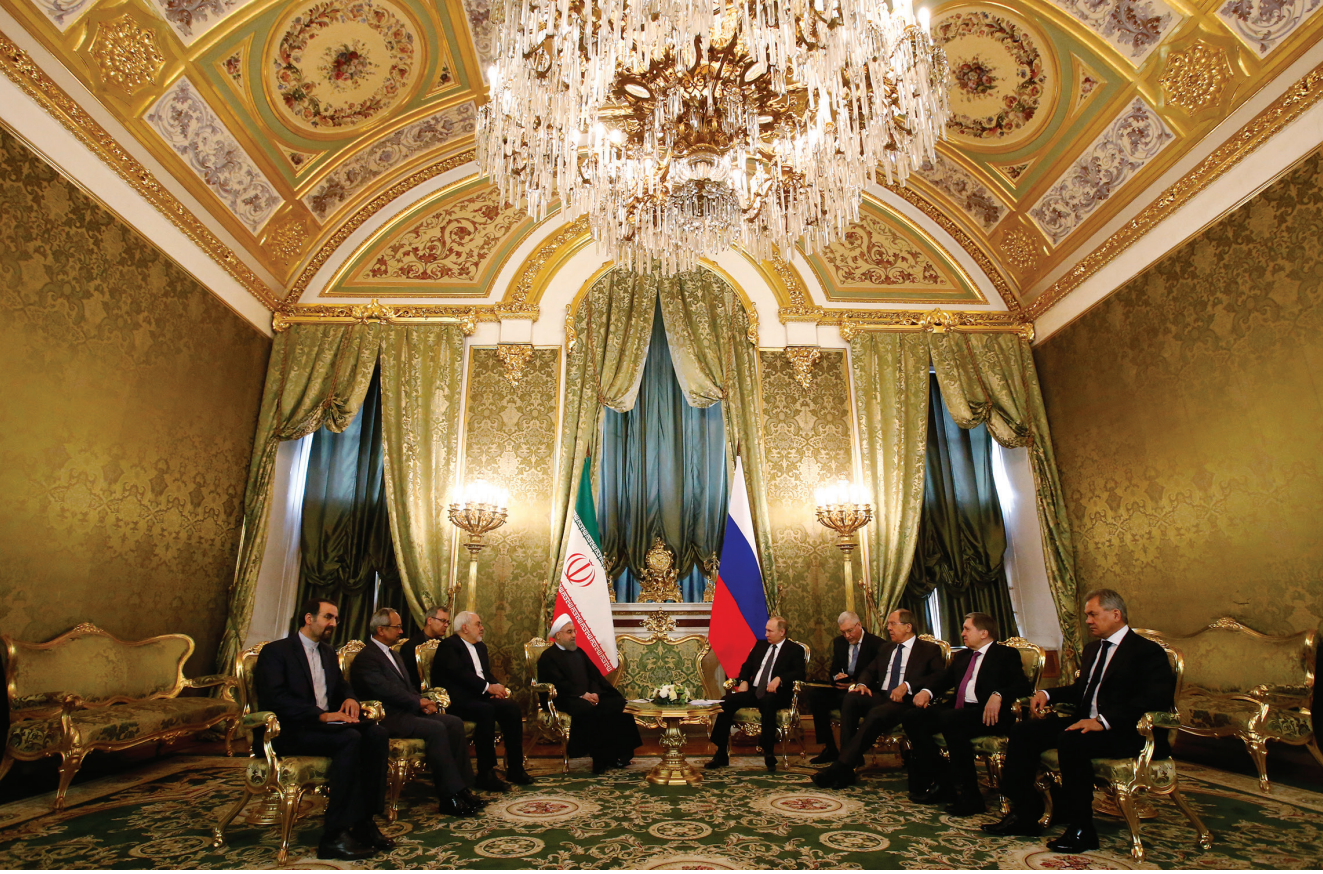
by Khamenei in September-December 2015 showed that the highest Iranian leadership still mistrusted the West and expected the continuation of the confrontation with the U.S. This meant that Tehran remained interested in Russia as a counterbalance to the American influence in the Middle East. However, in the case of Moscow, economic relations could not be a solid base for the formation of apolitical partnership with Iran. During the last five years, the bilateral trade has been gradually decreasing whereas the volume of mutual investments remains negligible. All attempts to revitalize these ties in 2007-2009 and 2012-2015 brought no results.

Consequently, Tehran made an attempt to build stronger cooperation with Russia over the political fundament. The Iranian authorities tried to find such political issues of mutual interest whose discussion could lead to a long-term cooperation between the two countries. The unprecedented degradation of Russia's relations with the U.S. after Euromaidan in Ukraine and Moscow's involvement in Syria created the long-awaited conditions for increasing the number of topics that could be discussed between Russia and Iran with high chances of working out common approaches. Putin's decision to deploy Russian troops in Syria opened even more options for such cooperation. Shortly after the beginning of the Russian military operation, the Iranian authorities sent a clear message about their readiness to interact with Russia: during his Sochi trip to Russia in 2015, the speaker of the Iranian parliament, Ali Larijani, openly stated that in spite of the future lifting of international sanctions imposed on the Islamic republic and the gradual end of Iran's international isolation the current leadership of the country sees Russia as a priority partner.[14]

The Russian leaders, on their side, also appeared to be extremely interested in strengthening relations with Tehran after the signing of the JCPOA. Since 2012, when the international community resumed its attempts to settle the Iranian nuclear issue, the Russian leaders have been concerned with the possibility that the end of the sanctions regime and subsequent Iranian rapprochement with the West might diminish Moscow influence in Tehran and distance the Islamic Republic from Russia. The above-mentioned failure to bind Iran to Russia through the intensification of the bilateral economic contacts compelled Moscow to intensify the discussion of the political issues of mutual in-



Russian President Putin meets with his Iranian counterpart Rouhani at the Kremlin on March 28, 2017.

AFP PHOTO / SERGEI KARPUKHIN

terest with Iran. Subsequently, cooperation in Syria became one of the main issues chosen by the Russian authorities as a base for the development of the bilateral dialogue.[15]

Brothers in Arms

The need to develop active cooperation between the two countries in Syria was also determined by the situation on the battleground. By 2015, Iranian resources were substantially exhausted. Moreover, it became obvious that Tehran's efforts alone were not enough to save Assad. Iran was also deeply involved, not only in the Syrian war but also in the Iraqi and Yemeni conflicts. Consequently, the Iranian government was compelled to juggle its limited human and material resources between these three countries.[16] The beginning of the Russian direct military involvement in Syria considerably eased the burden lying on Iran's shoulders by radically changing the balance of power in favor of Damascus. Moscow provided the Syrian regime and its Iranian allies with two things they seriously lacked: modern artillery systems and effective air support. As was proven by the events of the Libyan war of 2011 and the struggle of the Iraqi government against ISIS, without superiority in the air and effective artillery firepower the Arab regimes were doomed to lose their battle against rebels. It was not a coincidence that the Damascus regime started to lose its ground in 2015 after the final exhaustion of its air forces. According to the statements by eyewitnesses, in March-April 2015, the Syrian

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government imitated the use of aviation to put a moral pressure on its opponents rather than undertaking real air raids.[17] Damascus was running out of spare parts to repair its old Soviet planes and lacked munitions for them. The Iranians could not help its Syrian ally much as Tehran lacked modern and effective air forces itself: the international sanctions imposed on Tehran hampered the development of the military aviation in the Islamic republic. Most of the fighter jets used by the Iranian army are either out-of-date Soviet and Western planes or their locally produced copies.[18] The same could be said about the artillery equipment. As a result, the deployment of Russian airplanes in the Khmeimim base and the increase in the supplies of the modern military equipment (including Russian T-90 main battle tanks and advanced "Solntsepyok" artillery systems) played the role of a game changer.[19]

By 2017, Moscow felt itself quite comfortable in Syria. The Russian authorities managed to achieve their first goal –to save the Assad regime and ensure its success in retaking certain parts of the Syrian territory. Yet, the end of the game is still far for Russia. Moscow would like to put an end to the civil war in Syria or at least to ensure a sustainable ceasefire over a large part of the country's territory in order to be able to facilitate partial Russian military withdrawal (Moscow intends to keep its presence in the Tartus naval base and Khmeimim airbase after the end of the war in Syria). However, this is only possible to achieve through the revitalization of the political process, and that's where Moscow again needed Iran's help. In early 2017, Russia launched the so-called Astana platform where, with the help of Tehran and Ankara –the most influential regional sponsors of the Syrian confronting groupings– it made an attempt to launch a dialogue between Assad and his opponents. Negotiations in Astana between Damascus and a part of the military opposition as well as between Russia, Iran and Turkey that started in early 2017 in accordance with the Russian initiative were welcomed by the international community. Moreover these talks were seen as a serious attempt to launch a full-fledged peaceful settlement: as opposed to other existing negotiation formats they were primarily focused on the establishment of a ceasefire and, later on, the creation of the de-escalations zones. Moreover the negotiations included both Iran and a substantial part of the Syrian military opposition as their participants (which never properly happened in Geneva). In April-May 2017, Moscow used the Astana platform to launch another political initiative in Syria: the establishment of the de-escalation zones which are to decrease the intensity of the military confrontation in Syria. So far, the implementation of this initiative

is relatively successful. Yet, this success would not be possible without Iran's consent and assistance.

Marriage of Convenience

Both Russia and Iran appeared to be extremely interested in saving the government institutions in Syria. For sure, each of the sides had its own motives for this. Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war was determined by a number of factors. At the initial stage, the growing confrontation with the West and Putin's plans to re-establish Russia as an influential world power were the key drivers determining Moscow's decision to support the Assad regime in its struggle. Moscow wanted to demonstrate to the U.S. that it could stir up trouble if its opinion was not taken into account. Thus, in early 2013, Lavrov stated that in Syria the Russian government was eager to make the Americans "learn the lesson" that they should deal with Moscow only "on the basis of equality, balance of interests and mutual respect." In order to protect its interests, Russia used its veto several times (on October 4, 2011, February 4, 2012, July 19, 2012, and May 22, 2014) to prevent the adoption of UNSC Resolutions that, in Moscow's view, could lead to a further aggravation of the situation in and around Syria.

Finally, in 2013 the Russians managed to do what was previously believed to be impossible: they stopped what had appeared to be an inevitable military operation by the West against the Syrian regime. On August 21, 2013, international media sources reported the usage of a chemical weapon in one of Damascus's neighborhoods. Neither side in the conflict took responsibility for it. The Western powers and their Middle Eastern partners accused the Assad regime of the chemical attack. Subsequently, they tried to use their suspicions as a pretext for military intervention in the conflict. However, the reluctance of the Barack Obama administration and its failure to secure the approval of the U.S. Congress gave Moscow the necessary time to offer its own solution.

Nevertheless, with the further development of the conflict the Kremlin started to reassess its priorities. This was largely related to Moscow's growing concerns connected to the participation of Russian speaking fighters in the Syrian conflict on the side of anti-Assad forces. The numbers of jihadists from Russia and post-Soviet republics joining the struggle in Syria and Iraq had started actively growing since November 2013. Consequently, in 2015, Russia's decision to send troops to Syria was determined not only by Moscow's intentions to confront Western intentions to displace Assad but by a reason not related to the Russian-U.S. stand-off. Multiple interviews with Russian officials and decision-makers showed that, by 2015, one of the Russian's main concerns was that the fall of Assad's regime could lead to the spread of in-

The survival of the Syrian government institutions was and still is the top priority of the Kremlin. Nevertheless, the Russian leadership differentiates between the Syrian state and Assad

stability and radical Islamism to the post-Soviet space. By September 2015, Moscow's assessment was that the military, technological and financial assistance by Russia to the Syrian regime would extend its existence but not save it. Intervention was the result of a choice between a "bad" and a "very bad" scenario; between a costly military operation to support Assad or doing nothing as his power –and Russian influence– crumbled. The Russian leadership was motivated by its perception of what had happened in Libya and Iraq, where –in its view– nothing good came of the complete destruction of the old regimes.

Thus, in Syria, Russia was largely driven by its security concerns and strong belief that the building of a new post-conflict Syria was possible only through the evolution of the old regime and not through its complete dismantlement. The confrontation with the West and Putin's plans to re-establish Russia as an influential world power were the other factors that made Moscow support the Syrian authorities in their struggle. For Tehran, the necessity to save the government institutions was determined by a different reason. By supporting Assad in Syria Iran was fighting for its place in the system of regional affairs. The Iranian approaches to the Syrian issue are mainly shaped by the views of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his conservative supporters who still see the Islamic republic as a "besieged fortress." For them, the current improvement in relations with the West that started after the signing of the JCPOA in mid-2015 is believed to be just a temporary break in the endless struggle for Iran's national interests.[20] Within this approach Tehran's struggle for Syria is believed to be a part of the greater strategy designed by the Supreme Leader and his team, whose final goal is to secure the right of the Islamic Republic to the regional supremacy. The Iranian conservatives even formulated the concept of the "chain/line of defense" that comprises of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen.[21] According to the authors of this theory (such as the advisor to the Supreme Leader, Velayati), each of these countries represents the "front line" of the Iranian defenses against the international and regional opponents of the Islamic republic that strive to undermine its influence in the Middle East. Consequently the weakening of the Iranian presence in any of these four states can have global negative consequences for Tehran's geostrategic plans. The list of enemies against whom Iran is struggling in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen may occasionally differ but, as a rule, it includes the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia.

By 2015, the Iranian authorities had already formulated the formula that "the battle for Assad in Syria is a battle for Iran," and it clearly planned to fight for its

Syrian ally till the end. Moreover, according to Velayati, out of the four members of the "chain of defense" Syria has the greatest importance for Tehran.[22] The Supreme Leader's advisor even called this country a "golden ring" in this chain.[23]

The Iranian military involvement in Syria is also seen by the leadership of the Islamic Republic as a part of its traditional stand off against Israel and the U.S. In December 2015, Velayati openly called Syria "the bridge" that connects Iran with Lebanon (i.e. Hezbollah) and Palestine and that Tehran can only use it if the Alawi regime stays in power.[24] This approach to Syria inevitably puts Damascus in the center of the Iranian-Israeli-American triangle. Thus, according to another advisor to Khamenei, Yahya Rahim-Safavi, the final goal of the U.S. anti-Assad moves in Syria is to ensure the security of Israel.[25]

Such a vision of Syria inevitably makes the survival of the pro-Iranian Assad regime an existential issue for Tehran and, thus, puts the Islamic republic together with Russia in the camp of international forces interested in the survival of the Syrian state. Yet, neither Moscow not Tehran has illusions that they have enough military capacities to return Assad to full control over the country. As a result, both Iran and Russia support the international efforts to settle the Syrian conflict through negotiations as long as this process guarantees the preserving of the Russian and Iranian influence in the post-conflict Syria. This necessity to secure their presence in this Arab country after the end of the civil war, in turn, brings Russia and Iran closer diplomatically and allows them to cooperate on the ground of the international platforms that discuss the future of Syria.

Both Russia and Iran are very pragmatic about their cooperation in Syria. This also helps their dialogue. Neither Moscow nor Tehran has any illusions about the ultimate goals of its partner and how different they are. This was openly stated by Velayati. When characterizing the level of cooperation between Russia and Iran in Syria he argued that "each country pursues its own benefits [by supporting Assad], [but] Russia cannot protect its interests in the Middle East and the region alone."[26] From Velayati's point of view, Russia did its best to involve Iran in the international negotiations on the Syrian conflict as Moscow needed diplomatic support during its meetings with the sponsors of the Syrian opposition.[27] Iran, in its turn, agreed to help Moscow as the Iranian authorities believe that in Syria they are fighting in the "small world war" and without Russian support it will be difficult to win in it.[28] As stated by Velayati, Russia, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Oman formed the "diplomatic block of resistance" within the framework of the international negotiations on Syria.[29]

In other words, Russia and Iran came to an understanding that in order to secure their interests in Syria they need to cooperate. Consequently, Moscow

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov (R) and Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif (L) exchange documents during a signing ceremony following a meeting of Russian and Iranian presidents at the Kremlin on March 28, 2017.

AFP PHOTO / SERGEI KARPUKHIN

and Tehran formed a marriage of convenience where each partner tries to reach its own goals with the help of the other. Such an approach implies that the partners not only coordinate their activities, but try to avoid unnecessary confrontation over issues of secondary importance by making concessions and temporarily postponing the discussion of disputed questions that may prevent the sides from achieving their primary goals.

Thus, the principle of the marriage of convenience allowed Russia and Tehran to settle the dispute over the future of Assad and the Alawi regime. The Russian authorities have never been as loyal to Assad as Tehran. The survival of the Syrian government institutions was and still is the top priority of the Kremlin. Nevertheless, the Russian leadership differentiates between the Syrian state and Assad. From the long term perspective, Moscow does not exclude the replacement of the current Syrian president through the legal procedures if this does not harm the conflict settlement process. The Russian government also has the understanding of necessity to transform the Syrian regime into one that is more democratic and inclusive.[30]

The Iranian authorities, on the contrary, often do not see the difference between the Assad regime and the Syrian government institutions.[31] Initially, Tehran insisted that Assad's right to stay in power should not be questioned. Moreover, the Iranian authorities positioned this demand as one of their "red lines" in Syria.[32] This inflexible approach of Iran could seriously harm the Russian attempts to revitalize the negotiation process between Assad and the opposition. However, by December 2015, Russia and Iran managed to overcome this differ-

ence in views on Assad by agreeing that the Syrian president will leave his post if such demand is expressed by the majority of the Syrian people through the voting mechanisms existing in the Syrian constitution. Yet, neither Russian nor Iranian officials made clear statements on when all Syrians are going to have a chance to express their will regarding the future of Assad and what should be done to avoid staged elections, usual for the Alawi regime.

Respect demonstrated by Moscow towards the Syrian regime created the positive image of Russia among those Syrians who were loyal to Damascus but extremely irritated by the Iranian attempts to turn Assad into their puppet

The absence of the clearly stated deadlines and mechanisms for the referendum on Assad's destiny or the election of a new Syrian president leads to a conclusion that Moscow and Tehran simply postponed the discussion on the subject until better times, when nothing will threaten the Syrian government institutions. The current formula ("Assad may go one day") temporarily satisfies both the Russian and Iranian authorities: it does not deny the possibility of political changes (important for Russia), but also does not argue that Assad's removal is inevitable (important for Iran).

Far from Being Allies

Yet, it is too early to speak about the emergence of a fully fledged Russian-Iranian alliance in Syria. So far, military coordination between the two countries has been patchy. Neither is in a hurry to create joint command structures. While, after the Russian involvement in Syria, Iran-Russia relations accelerated and there were numerous multilevel bilateral meetings to coordinate joint efforts of Moscow and Tehran, their coordination is still not all-embracing, and in most cases, the sides simply prefer to determine the general direction of their joint efforts in Syria while taking parallel paths to the same destination and acting semi-independently. Thus, periodically, Tehran was separately contacting the Syrian opposition factions with its own peace plan trying to organize rebel's negotiations with Damascus. In September 2015, the Iranian authorities even managed to facilitate the fragile ceasefire between the Syrian regime and Jaish al-Fateh in several areas.[33] In each case, Moscow was informed about Tehran's plans but it never participated in their implementation. When interacting with the Syrian regime, Russia and Iran also use different tactics. Given all financial, human and material resources invested by the Iranian authorities in the survival of the Assad government, Tehran sees Damascus as its minor partner to whom it could give direct orders.[34] As

If Moscow formed a full-fledged military alliance with Iran in Syria, this would affect Russian relations with the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council

a result, the behavior of the Iranian leadership towards its Syrian counterparts is extremely paternalistic: if necessary, the Iranian authorities could try to impose their military-political decisions on Assad. Those officials who actively oppose the Iranian dictate have a tendency to die under very suspicious circumstances.[35] In addition to that, since the outset of the active phase of the Syrian conflict, Iran has been trying to create paramilitary structures in Syria that would be directly dependent on Tehran and only loosely connected to Damascus. Initially the creation of these paramilitary structures was also supposed to guarantee the Iranian influence in the country, if Assad falls, by acting as the local military groupings that would be supported directly from Iran.[36]

Russia, on the contrary, has never put excessive pressure on the Syrian regime or tried to dictate what it had to do. Moscow also avoided any obvious actions behind Assad's back. According to some members of the Syrian opposition, the Kremlin made occasional attempts to find a successor for Assad who would be strong enough to control the situation in the country but more acceptable for the opposition as the head of the Syrian state during the beginning of the national reconciliation process. Nevertheless, this search for the Assad replacement (if it ever happened) was done very gently and cautiously in order not to irritate the current leader of the Syrian state.[37] Respect demonstrated by Moscow towards the Syrian regime created the positive image of Russia among those Syrians who were loyal to Damascus but extremely irritated by the Iranian attempts to turn Assad into their puppet.[38] Consequently, part of the Syrian elite considers Moscow as a natural counterbalance to the obtrusive Iranians. This inevitably concerns the Iranians whose military leaders are not always ready to share their influence in Syria with Russia.[39]

Finally, the current format of the Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria based on the principle of the marriage of convenience also prevents the dialogue between the two countries from evolving into a strategic alliance. In order to achieve the current primary goal –to save the Syrian government from falling– the countries agreed to temporary ignore the differences in their approaches towards the settlement of those issues that, at present, are of the secondary importance. However, this only means that the discussion of these questions (such as the future of Assad or Iran's plans to use the territory of Syria to continue supporting the Hezbollah in Lebanon) is just temporarily postponed. Sooner or later, Russia and Iran will need to return to their discussion, and there are no reasons to assume that the positions of the two countries regarding these postponed problems will become closer by then. For instance, the

leading Iranian politicians periodically repeat their mantra that Assad should be kept in power at all costs.[40] At the same time, the Russian officials do not exclude the scenario of the post-Assad Syria.[41]

Geopolitical Acrobatics

The last but not least role, in limiting the capacities of the Russian-Iranian dialogue on Syria, is played by the factor of the third countries. Russia carefully watches that their cooperation on Syria would not harm the development of their relations with the West and the regional powers. It is important to keep in mind that Russian diplomacy in the Middle East is based on the principle of balancing between different states as long as they are ready to deal with Moscow. In spite of the current political turmoil in the region, the Kremlin, so far, is very successful in maintaining relatively good relations with the key players of the Middle East. Under these circumstances, forming an alliance with Tehran is an unaffordable luxury for Moscow as this would ruin the Russian strategy of balancing between the main players of the Middle East. Thus, if Moscow formed a full-fledged military alliance with Iran in Syria, this would affect Russian relations with the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council –whose money is considered by the Kremlin as a potential source of investment into the Russian economy. The Russo–Iranian alliance would also undermine Moscow's diplomatic efforts to settle the Syrian crisis by making the Saudis less willing to talk to Russia and effectively dragging Moscow into the middle of the broader Sunni-Shia confrontation, allowing anti-Russian political forces in the Middle East to portray the Kremlin as an enemy of the Sunni world. This would be a serious threat, not only to the Russian position in the region, but also, conceivably, for the domestic security of Russia, where the 15 million-strong Muslim community is predominantly Sunni. Salafi groupings in the Gulf have depicted the Russians as new crusaders at least since the beginning of the civil war in Syria.[42] Moscow received a serious warning in October 2015 when approximately 50 Saudi clerics signed an open declaration calling for jihad against Moscow.[43]Consequently, Russian cautiousness in developing cooperation with Tehran might also be an attempt to improve Moscow's image in the Sunni world. This image suffered severely after the beginning of the Russian bombings of the Syrian opposition that together with the radical Islamists became one of the main targets of the Russian air forces.

By allying with Tehran, Moscow would most likely harm relations with its 'silent partner' in the Middle East: Israel. By 2017, the Kremlin managed to substantially improve its relations with Tel Aviv. The Russian and the Israeli authorities have finally come to the understanding that there will always be certain restraints on the development of bilateral ties and focused on the exploitation of opportunities rather than discussing fundamental problems. Consequently, in

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2015 Israel secured Moscow's guarantee that the issue of the Iranian nuclear program would be settled in such a way as to eliminate any security threats to Israel. In return, the Israelis took a neutral position in the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation, abstaining from the UN General Assembly vote on Resolution 68/262 against the Russian annexation of Crimea and silently supported Russian military involvement in Syria. The Israeli authorities also refused to support the main sanctions imposed by the U.S. and EU on Russia, although some restrictions on cooperation with Russia in the military and banking spheres were still supported.

Conclusion

Russia and Iran will remain interested in cooperation on Syria (including certain coordination of their military efforts). Yet, it is still difficult to see these relations transforming into a full-fledged alliance. Although the drivers that bring Moscow and Tehran together are strong, the destiny of the Russian-Iranian "marriage of convenience" depends on a number of factors. Thus, the serious challenge for the continuation of interaction between Moscow and Tehran will be posed by questions related to the future of post-conflict Syria. Apart from the issue of Assad's replacement, Russia and Iran may not come to terms about Kurdish rights in new Syria or the country's form of governance.

A strong Russian presence in post-conflict Syria may also be a serious impediment for the fulfillment of Iran's regional plans. Moscow will definitely be against using the Syrian territory for anti-Israeli activities. The Kremlin can also object to Tehran's plans to resume the discussion with Damascus about the building of the Iran-Iraq-Syria-Mediterranean Sea gas pipeline whose construction could be against Russian interests in the international gas market.

All in all, Russia and Iran were forced to become partners in Syria under the influence of existing circumstances. Consequently, their interaction is limited to the exchange of information and occasional coordination on the ground. Given the differences in motives of Russian and Iranian involvement in the Syrian quagmire and concerns existing both in Tehran and Moscow, that the forming of a full-fledged alliance can harm their relations with third countries, it is possible to conclude that Russian-Iranian dialogue has already reached the maximum of its potential.

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