



JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

Specialized Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly Periodical Journal

Year 1. issue 3 - June, 2017

ISSUED BY



**Arabian Gulf Centre
for Iranian Studies**
www.arabiangcis.org

Alliance of Necessity between Iran and Russia

Dialectical Interaction between Opportunities and Challenges

Mohammad al-Sa'eed Idris (Ph.D.)

Prof. and consultant of political sciences
in al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies

Historically, Russian-Iranian relations provide an almost unique paradigm on managing relations that are ruled by contradicted, multiple factors such as ideological, interests, geopolitical, and historical factors. However, in the midst of these factors were international conflicts and the Middle Eastern regional environment that played key roles in resolving these available opportunities and complex challenges. Before the 1979 revolution, Soviet-Shah relations were pursued in this same historical manner; from then until 1991, the Soviets and the Iranian Republic pursued a new strategy. After that, Russian-Iranian relations changed into their contemporary form.

The nature of Russian-Iranian relations is such that there are opportunities for understanding and cooperation. These opportunities come in addition to the relations of rivalry and mutual conflict that continue to this day. These opportunities exist despite the regional instability that exists in the ME, especially after 2011 – the year of chaos in Arab countries and the “Syrian Crisis,” which is especially important considering that the Syrian regime is a joint ally of Moscow and Tehran.

There had been conflicts in the Middle East that influenced Russian-Iranian relations, especially in 1979 and 1991, but the events of 2011 had a greater impact on these relations and prompt questions about the future of Russian-Iranian relations and their implications: An alliance or a rivalry that will turn later to conflict?

In 1979, four major developments happened in the Middle East that shattered the patterns of alliances and conflicts. These developments have affected Russian-Iranian relations until now:

1- The fall of the Shah Regime and the establishment of the Iranian republic.

2- The Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan.

3- Egypt’s signing of the peace treaty with Israel, which removed Egypt from the Arab-Israeli conflict. Then, Iran emerged as an element in this conflict and in all other regional affairs.

4- The eight-year war in 1980 between Iraq and Iran.

In the midst of these four developments, Iranian-Russian (Soviet) relations developed with a balance between cooperation, rivalry and conflict.

In 1991, the United States led an international coalition in the Gulf War to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi invasion. This international intervention in the Gulf led to major important developments in GCC-US relations and profound transformations in the equation of Arabian Gulf security. In the same year, the Soviet Union had fallen and the Warsaw Pact has been disintegrated, which resulted in the collapse of an international bipolar system; the United States sought to impose itself at the top of a unipolar global system, which had major impacts on the Middle East, especially the Gulf and Iran. Equal to these impacts were its direct influence on the Russian Federation, which inherited the Soviet Union legacy of military and political burdens of which it could not get rid. These negative effects were the motivation for a new renaissance of Russia’s international role, which was now looking forward to competing or at least participating in the Global system leadership, especially with the advent of President Vladimir Putin to political power in Moscow.

These impacts were felt at the domestic and Middle East regional level in Iran and Russia, as well as at the level of global interactions, especially after the new emergence of Russia and China as countries seeking to impose a multipolar global system and curb US power, which was straining after two difficult wars in Afghanistan in 2002 and Iraq in 2003. Iran and Russia developed patterns of corporation at times and rivalry at others, but the post-2011

Arabian status quo will decide the nature of the new Iranian-Russian relations and their future: whether an “Alliance of Necessity” imposed by the Syrian crisis or a “Necessary Evil.”¹ Both Iran and Russia currently see the other as a partner or necessary alliance, but how long will this continue? More importantly, who must decide: Russia or Iran? In other words, who is the key player?

If we agree that power is with Russia, specifically in managing the Syrian crisis, then we must consider that this crisis is the key point regarding Russian-Iranian relations. First, we must understand Russia’s ambitions in the Middle East, and the position of Iran within future international policies toward the ME. We must also understand **the factors that influence Russian-Iranian relations** and finally discover the implications and future of these relations. This paper will review and explore these factors:

First: The determinants of the Russian-Iranian relations

The development of Russian-Iranian relations reveals many factors that support the improvement of these relations, but there exist others that could cause a failure of them. In other words, there are factors both of mutual interests and of risk prevention, so, while the two countries are seeking to maximize possible gains and face semi-mutual challenges, this may be interrupted by the ambivalence of the relations between Iran and Russia.

Although Russia got rid of its Soviet ideological legacy, which reached its peak during the Cold War as support for “Global Liberation Movements” against US-led Western colonialism, but it did not dispose of the legacy of competition with the US. In addition, the collapse of Soviet ideology led to use of the ‘interest factor’ in the Russian foreign policy making. All this made Russia keen to be present in global regions which hold strategic and economic interest, as well as regions of former Soviet influence that have moved towards the United States.

In general, the Middle East has a place of priority in Russian foreign policy. The Arabian Gulf, for example, is still an ambition for Russia to reach the ‘Warm Water’ coasts across Iran to reduce the United States’ influence and advance their interests. This policy also needed to confront particular challenges with Putin’s second era beginning in 2012, which coincided with Arab region chaos and wars on terrorism. **The new Russian role in the Middle East can be observed through the following factors:**²

- 1- Russian-Putin ambitions to be an international power against the United States of America.
- 2- Russian failure to restart relations with the United States (Rest) in the Vladimir Medvedev era.
- 3- The US-EU embargo on Russia because of the Ukraine crisis, and Russians response to use the Middle East an appropriate place to gain influence against the West, show Russia as an international power and end the embargo.
- 4- The emergence of ‘political Islam,’ which encouraged Russia to enter into this development and oppose pro-terrorist-movements, considered a threat to its interests in the Middle East.

5- The major deception toward Russia regarding Security Council Resolution No. 173. At that time, Russia abstained from voting and did not use 'VETO', which allowed Atlantic Military intervention in Libya and ousted Gaddafi's regime.

6- Russia realized that all developments in the region, and specifically in Syria, its only ally in the region, require strong intervention to protect interests and confront challenges.³

Here, Russia and Iran coincided. Iran early defended Bashar Assad's regime and did not recognize the Syrian crisis as a revolution, but as a coup, rebellion and foreign plot. This was contrary to Iran's view of 'revolutions' in the rest of Arab countries, which were considered as an 'Islamic Revival' similar to the 'Iranian Revolution.'⁴

There are several reasons for the Russian-Iranian rapprochement. Mutual relations developed after the 1990s at the levels of economy, commerce and oil. Also, Russian experts participated in many semi-nuclear and military projects in Iran and contributed to the establishment of the Bushehr nuclear reactor, and signed 20bn dollars' worth of mutual contracts on oil, gas and energy.⁵

For Russia, Iran is not only an important trade partner or armament importer but a state of strategic influence in the Gulf and the Middle East. Iran also has a long history of adversity toward United States' policies in the Gulf and the Middle East. Furthermore, Russia considers itself as confronting **two major strategic threats**:

1- The United States attempts to blockade Russia and, through NATO, approach into neighboring countries.

2- Extremist groups' that are deployed across Central Asian countries.

In this context, Iran is a 'safety valve' for Russia, due to its ideological controversy with some of these extremist groups and its confrontation against the United States' project of domination that threatens it with sanctions and embargo.⁶

Russia has many factors to rapprochement with Iran. The latter is seen as a Shiite power to cope with Sunni regional powers such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Another factor is the Gulf States scramble to establish a joint coalition with the United States against Iran, as happened in Camp David, Washington in June 2015, when the Gulf States met with former president Barack Obama after P5+1 countries signed the JCPOA with Iran. Finally, there is the fear of lifting economic sanctions on Iran, especially after Iran's blatant interference in Yemen.⁷

The crucial motivation that pushes Russia towards Iran is the latter's alignment with Bashar Assad's regime. Russia saw in Iran the only pillar to ensure Assad's survival and to confront [in Moscow's view] the 'pervasive terrorist wave' that engulfed Syria. As never before, Russia and Iran rapprochement reached its peak on the joint Syrian battlefield, although Moscow's realization of the motives varies with Iran. At the same time, Iran sees Russia as the only power to defend their Syrian ally, keeping in mind that Iranian rapprochement toward Russia is an expression of interactions in Iranian foreign policy.

Three essential components rule foreign policy in Iran:

- 1- Ideology.
- 2- Iranian national identity.
- 3- Iranian revolution earnings.⁸

These three components influence the Iranian regime, and not only on foreign policy. An additional 'geostrategic component' could appear as a fourth in this case to strengthen Iranian foreign policy according to its abundant chances toward confronting challenges. The geostrategic component can be mixed with the ideological one, as they both create an Iranian role and national interest among Iranian ideological and strategic potential.

In other words, the ideological component is concentrated in the Shiite twelfth sect ruled by the Jurist Leadership [Wilayat Faqih] doctrine, which has become not only a political regime but also a dominating religious and cultural identity, as well as a 'national interest' that controls the regime's performance.⁹

Simultaneously, the geostrategic determinant consists of chance and threat for Iran, due to its geographic location, a place that is associated with its political and economic history with an area of 1,648,195 km², equivalent to threefold France's area. Iran has borders of a length of 8731 km: 1280 km with Iraq, 470 km with Turkey, 827 km with Afghanistan, 877 km with Pakistan, 1740 km with Central Asia countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan) and the remaining 2700 km re littoral on the Arabian Gulf, Qazvin Sea and Arab Sea.¹⁰ Historically, these borders were the reason behind many foreign invasions of Iran, including from 'Tsarist Russia.'

Eventually, the Iranian role that grew out of the political project of the Iranian Republic has imposed more challenges on Iran because of its ideological-political duality. This is in addition to the consequences that hit Iran as reaction from neighboring regional countries and international powers that have interests that clash directly with the Iranian project.

The Iranian project also overwhelmed its historical role in the region, and this project faces two challenges to achieve its goals:

A- Defending a regime that has suffered embargo since its establishment in 1979, because it came from the rubble of the Shah's regime that was allied with the United States, Arab countries, Turkey [between partnership and competition] and Israel, with which the following clerical regime severed ties. The Iranian regime also adopted a revolutionary project and seeks to export it across the region in the name of historical and doctrine responsibilities. The regime also suffers challenges inside Iran due to its demographic, sectarian and ethnic diversity. Furthermore, Iran's strategic location makes it an inevitable part of international conflicts, especially after the independence of many Soviet Republics post-1991 and the United States and Israeli military and intelligence mastery after Sep. 11th. In other words, after the American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran became surrounded by intense American military action.¹¹

B- The struggle for regional domination, which increased in magnitude compared to the Shah's attempts. The Iranian republic's political revolutionary sectarian project seeks overall change and to 'Export the Iranian Revolution' in order to impose its nature on the

region. This radical ideological regime always raises slogans such as disown 'injustice' and 'arrogant.' The Iranian regime also claims the support of 'oppressed people' all around the world, a matter that creates clashes with regional powers, as Iran is involved in policies of interference in other countries' internal affairs, penetrating into them to make illicit internal alliances and clash with other international and regional parties. Article 13 of the Iranian Constitution states that "The official religion of the state is 'Islam' on the 'Twelfth Jafari' doctrine." Article 76 states that "The Iranian president should be Iranian to the root, hold Iranian citizenship and have full belief in the Iranian Republic's principles and its official doctrine."¹² Those two constitutional texts caused a crucial question about the "Global Islamism" or "Islamic Unity": were they intended in this context or one of 'Shiite Sectarian Islam'? In other words, is the Iranian republic a 'global Islamic' project or 'Shiite Sectarian' project?

Officially, there is a categorical denial that the Iranian republic project is a Shiite sectarian one, but practical acts reveal a key role for the sectarianism in foreign policy making domestically and abroad. The Iranian republic is concentrated in two terms: the 'Republic' [Interest] and 'Islamic' [Ideology]. The republic is a mixture of both the 'State' and the 'Iranian society,' with its long history of culture and global civilization, Islamic civilization in particular.

Whether it is 'Islamic' or not, the Iranian republic has essential interests in its state, society, civilization, history and regional role due to its commitment to an 'Islamic global' project no matter its denomination. However, the 'Shiite doctrine' unintentionally overburdens the Iranian republic. Therefore, Iran is not just a republic that holds 'Islamic' or sectarian [Shiite] commitments, but also a state that has multiple nationalities, faiths and sects and must further its own national security requirements.

'Islamic' principles and national interests in Iran differ from one Iranian political current to another and from one leader to another. Thus, Iran can experience all gradients between maximum adherence to national interests without any consideration for 'Islam' to maximum enthusiasm for Islamism without any consideration for national interests. These two axes have many political powers and currents in-between that interact, vary and coincide on political visions and national programs inside Iran and abroad.

For example, because of this mixture of political variety, Iran decided to stand with the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq due to its sectarian and political conflicts with the Taliban and its eight-year military struggle with Saddam's regime. In addition, Iran encouraged United States' policies toward Iraq from 2003-2005, which served the Iranian project in terms of dismantling any anti-Iran regime in Baghdad, but then the dual interests in Iraq become inconsistent after Washington's awareness of the negative effect of allying with Shiites on relations with Sunnis, a matter that escalated political Shiism in neighboring countries. Sunnis inside turned to support for resistance and Sunnis abroad turned to a movement against the American project in Iraq.

In fact, the Iranian project has always been in conflict with the Americans since the born of the republic after 1979, which raised "Death to America" slogan and named it

[the United States] as the “Great Satan.” This clash turned to an American-Israeli military threat toward Iran’s nuclear ambitions and its project that stands against the American-Israeli project of peace and the American existence in Iraq since 2005.¹³

Consequently, Iran becomes a ‘Rogue State’ from the American and Israeli perspectives, and become a threat for many Arabian Gulf Countries due to involvement in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. The perception of Iranian threat among the Arabian Gulf States increased after the JCPOA signing with P5+1. Iran considered the nuclear deal an international recognition of its crucial regional role that allows Iranian interference in other countries’ affairs, an issue confirmed by the Saudi FM Adel al-Jubeir in the ‘Munich Security Conference’: “Iran is the major sponsor of terrorism in the world” and “Iran is the source of challenge in the region, as it is based on ‘Exporting the Iranian Revolution’ and does not believe in citizenship concept and wants all Shiites in the world to be exclusively affiliated for Iran and not for their origin countries.” Adel al-Jubeir accused Iran of “seeking to change regimes in the Middle East.”¹⁴

The Iranian military’s direct intervention in Syria was backed with affiliated Shiite organizations, especially Lebanese ‘Hezbollah’ and other Iraqi Shiite and Afghani militias. This exacerbated tensions within the region and with the United States and other Western countries and made Russia realize that Iran has become a major regional power. Khamenei’s Iran asserted there would not be any future corporation with the United States, especially after America not only showed deliberate reluctance toward repealing sanctions imposed on it after the nuclear deal, but also endorsed new ones.¹⁵ Eventually, Iran and Russia met on the Syrian crisis and established a cooperation, not a strategic one but to prevent the fall of Assad’s regime and write a new political equation to ensure the interests of both Tehran and Moscow in Syria.

The Iranian-Russian rapprochement happened as a reaction to sanctions and their joint position toward their embargoes, one regarding the Iranian nuclear program and the other the Russian crisis in Ukraine. In addition, Iranian-Russian interests coincided in advocating for their violated interests in Libya by the West and other at-risk interests in Syria. These factors did not exist pre-2012 in the Medvedev era, who marginalized relations with Iran, a decision that was reversed in the next era when Putin reassumed the Kremlin.¹⁶

This Russian political transformation toward Iran was realized after the 4th conference of Qazvin Countries in Sep. 29th, 2014, where Russian political analysts asserted that the Moscow-Tehran relations had been improved on all economic, trade, industrial and military levels after the Medvedev era. This was in addition to joint regional coordination toward certain issues. Iranian observers have been optimistic, especially after the Joint Commerce Committee meeting in Tehran Sep. 7th-11th, 2014, which led to Iranian observers expecting a tenfold rise in trade volume equalling almost 70bn Euro.¹⁷

Russian investors have found an opportunity to cooperate with Iran, especially in the fields of oil, gas, petrochemicals, nuclear power, electricity, roads and construction infrastructure. On November 11, 2014, Russia signed an agreement with Iran to build eight new nuclear power plants with an ambition to build two new nuclear reactors at the Bushehr Nuclear Complex in addition to a nuclear power unit built by Russian engineers

and delivered in 2013. Iran's interest in developing economic relations with Russia was equaled by the other side, especially as Iran weighed the nuclear deal's possible results on the P5+1 group, such as a continuation of sanctions and perhaps multiplication of them. Therefore, there was no safe alternative for a commercial and economic partner other than Russia.

During and following the failure to reach a comprehensive settlement for the Iranian nuclear program crisis in Vienna, the Russian Minister of Economic Development, Alex Olokayev, arrived in Tehran and signed a memorandum of understanding with the Iranian Minister of Industry, Mohammad Reza Nemtazadeh, aimed at supporting investment and joint trade between the two countries. Moreover, they agreed to consolidate strategic cooperation between Russian export companies and the Iranian export guarantee fund, hoping to ease the impact of Western sanctions on Iran.¹⁸

During these years, especially prior to the nuclear deal signing, Iranians were concerned that this increasing pace of cooperation relations with Moscow could continue, because they realized that these relations were linked to external variables, especially the rise and fall of Russian-American relations. Their bet was that only without strong economic ties between the West and Russia would the latter not back down in developing its relationships with Iran.

This Iranian skepticism did not come from a vacuum; there were Russian practices that made Iran not rely on an alliance or partnership with Russia and there was an Iranian perception that the priority for Moscow was and will always be the relationship with the West, which is a network of huge geostrategic and economic interests for Russia. The most important indicators of this perception were the Russian position on the Iranian nuclear issue, as Russia fully adhered to the P5+1 position, regardless of the cooperation between Moscow and Tehran in the peaceful nuclear energy field.

Russia has repeatedly rejected Iranian military nuclear capabilities and has committed to positive voting in favor of all Security Council resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran [six decisions since 2006 to 2010] for failing to comply with IAEA requirements.¹⁹ Russia also committed to banning the export of weapons to Iran, according to former President Medvedev's decision on Sep. 22nd, 2010; unilaterally Russia has imposed a ban on the export of the (S-300) missile system, worth \$800 million, which was contracted by the Russian government and Iran. The latter then resorted to the International Court of Arbitration to get compensation worth four billion dollars for canceling the (S-300) missiles deal.²⁰

Russia has continued to satisfy the West at the expense of Iran over the nuclear program crisis. Russia proposed to be an intermediary to enrich Iranian uranium on the Russian soil, a solution to the West's insistence on preventing Iran from uranium enrichment, which Iran vehemently rejected. Russia has also delayed the completion of the final stages of the Bushehr reactor for more than seven years due to Western and Israeli pressure.

The shift in the Russian position took place when conflict with the United States intensified after Washington's insistence on expanding NATO to Russia's neighboring countries in the Central Asia, Caucasus and Caspian regions. Russia found that cooperation with Iran might be one of Russia's most important defensive policies against aggressive Western attitudes.

Thus, the Iranian-Russian relations continued to oscillate between ascendancy and decline due to various determinants and factors that prevented any convergence towards an alliance or a strategic partnership, but also prevented the deterioration of cooperation towards a conflict, especially in light of a mutual need for cooperation as a 'Necessary Alliance' in the Syrian crisis.

Second: The Syrian crisis and the development of Russian-Iranian relations

The Syrian crisis imposed an alliance between Iran and Russia, but despite all the factors encouraging this alliance, it did not exceed a 'selective strategic alliance,' which reflects the progress and retreat in this relationship caused by the convergence or divergence of the two countries' roles. This balance is further motivated by the roles of competing forces towards Iran regarding the relationship with Russia in the Syrian crisis: the United States, Turkey and Israel, all parties that have played distinctive roles in the Russian-Iranian partnership rapprochement in Syria, and which will inevitably govern the future of these relations according to their interactions in the Syrian crisis.

In order to determine the parameters of interaction between Iran and Russia, it is necessary to indicate a number of facts:

1- Iran preceded Russia in intervening in the Syrian crisis alongside President Bashar al-Assad's regime against what it considered an "external conspiracy" targeting the forces of resistance.

2- Iran played a crucial role in convincing Russia to intervene in Syria.

3- Russia realized that its interests in Syria were threatened, and that these interests intermingled with those of other parties. Other international and regional factors in the Syrian crisis were still controlling the course of Iran's relations development with Russia, particularly during the last two years.

There are two narratives for the Iranian attempt to convince Russia to intervene in the Syrian crisis:

1- Ali Khamenei, as the supreme commander of the Iranian armed forces, directly requested Russian intervention in a letter held by his adviser for international affairs, Ali Akbar Velayati, before September 2015 and handed personally to Russian President Vladimir Putin.²¹

2- General Qassem Suleimani, the commander of Quds Force, visited Moscow, held talks with the Russian President Vladimir Putin and persuaded him to join the Iranian-led "resistance front." The Iranian ambition was "to extend Russian intervention in order to provide the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad with power that he needs."²²

These two narratives may be questionable in the light of Russia's strong and clear position as the only [so to speak] independent variable and Iran as a dependent variable in the relationship between the two parties in the Syrian crisis. Therefore, if we seek to investigate the crisis, we must focus mainly on the Russian factor and the factors influencing its positions toward Syria.

In this context, we should note remarkable positions and statements:

1- After two years of Russian intervention in Syria, President Vladimir Putin said that “if there will be any force responsible for restructuring the Middle East, so it will be Russia not Iran.”

2- Regarding the responsible party for inviting other parties to Lausanne conference, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that “Russia persuaded its American partners to allow Iran to participate in the Lausanne conference alongside other regional countries.”²³

3- An Iranian text, issued by the ‘Center for Strategic Studies’ in Iran, focused on the Russian intervention in Syria as motivated by Russian interests, including President Vladimir Putin’s assertion that “the Russian military presence in Syria is to counter terrorism” and that “without the help of Russia, Syria will get worse, will fall into the hands of ISIS, and the number of refugees fleeing to Europe will increase.” The Iranian ‘Center for Strategic Studies,’ in its Strategic Report (No. 75- October 2015), states that President Putin has chosen the right time to send Russian troops to Syria. On the one hand, the Assad army lost much of its territory and suffered more losses. On the other hand, after the losses resulting from the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States’ desire for isolation has increased,²⁴ meaning that only Russia could intervene seriously to stop ISIS.

Nikolai Koraliev, the former Russian military attaché in Tehran, gave an important clarification to CNN that gave more assurances about the nature of Russia’s role in Syria: “Russia is not fighting for Assad, but it helps him to preserve the Syrian lands.”²⁵

According to this definition of the relationship between Russia and Iran in Syria, we can distinguish three tracks and reveal the limits of compatibility and divergence between Russia and Iran: the Russia-Iran disagreement over crisis management after the Vienna Conference to achieve peace in Syria, the Turkish-Russian relations and their positive impact on the Russian-Iranian relations and the post-battles of Aleppo and the split in the Iranian-Russian visions on the American role and the limits of Turkish participation and Russian-Israeli understandings.

Russia-Iran disagreement on the Vienna Conference

Recently, Russia and Iran enjoyed strong relations with Iraq and Syria. This rapprochement between the two countries was driven by many reasons: the Russian perception of US-Iranian disagreement, even after signing the nuclear deal against Israeli and GCC countries’ expectations, the defeat of the Syrian regime’s army, the progress of the US, Turkish and Arabian-supported opposition on the battleground in Syria and the US involvement in the Iraqi internal crisis by establishing domestic Sunni forces to confront ISIS. In the beginning, Russia-Iran cooperation in Iraq started by establishing a quartet intelligence centers to exchange information between Russia, Iran, Iraq and Syria and confront ISIS, as stated by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on September 27, 2015. On his part, Iran’s foreign minister, Mohammed Jawad Zarif, said that Tehran favored this cooperation due to its common interests with Russia, unlike Iran’s severe relations with the United States.

Zarif met John Kerry, the US Secretary of State, on September 25, 2015, in Washington and the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov on August 17, 2017. Kerry insisted on overthrowing Syrian president Bashar Assad, while Lavrov rejected Assad's removal and said Assad was the foundation of Syrian unity and part of the war on terrorism.²⁶ The two different positions of the two ministers drove Tehran to enhance ties with Russia to preserve the reign of its ally, Bashar Assad in Syria.

On September 20, 2015, Russia announced the beginning of its military operations in Syria, known as the Sukhoi Storm. Russian military interference tipped the scales in favor of a political solution in Syria for the first time since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011. In the Vienna conference, with the participation of sixteen countries, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Iran, the European Union and the P5 group on October 30, 2015, Russia pushed toward a political settlement for the Syrian crisis, supported by all participants, based on Security Council resolution 2254 on December 18, 2015. Participants also agreed on a timetable for ceasefire and establishment of a comprehensive government followed by constitutional amendments or construction of a new constitution and parliamentary and presidential elections within eighteen months. However, the conference did not refer to the future of Syrian president Assad at the will of Moscow and Tehran, who insisted on giving this right to the Syrian people without any foreign interference.

The Vienna conference resolutions upset Iran. Tehran was surprised by the Russian position and this new conflict of interests between the two countries on the Syrian issue. In addition to Tehran, the Syrian regime and Hezbollah were also disappointed after a wave of optimism about Russian military operations in Syria. The three allies expected Russian interference to tip the balance of power in Syria in favor of the Syrian regime, especially with the extension of Russia's airstrikes on ISIS and the other Jihadist groups supported by some Arabic, regional and international actors. These strikes were also expected to weaken the Syrian opposition and negatively influence its political position in any future peace talks on Syria, strengthen the regime's stand to regain control of the country and rule out the idea of overthrowing Assad's regime that was required by the United States and its regional and international allies and the Syrian opposition.²⁷ Nevertheless, Iran, Bashar Assad and Hezbollah found themselves on opposite ends against their Russian Ally due to Russia's eagerness for a political solution to the Syrian civil war.

Russia expressed its position early and called Bashar Assad to meet President Vladimir Putin to discuss Assad's future rather than the Russian political solution for the Syrian crises. Unlike Tehran and the Syrian regime's expectations, this was a message to Iran and its allies that Russia ruled out the condition of securing Assad's regime when negotiating a political settlement for the Syrian civil war and preserving Syrian unity. In fact, Russia and Iran seemed to be fighting two separate wars in Syria. The Russian goal was to bring all sides to the table, find a political solution and avoid any military confrontation with the United States and Israel in Syria, while Iran sought to preserve Assad's regime in this country.

Russia had a high level of coordination in Syria with both the US and Israel to avoid any clashes between the three actors. For example, Israeli warplanes attacked a Syrian military

convoy in Qalamoun—a Russian intensive flying area—near the Lebanese borders loaded with arms supplies going to Hezbollah, which further deepened disagreement between Russia and Iran in Syria.²⁸

Russia-Iran disagreement also increased due to Russian eagerness to restore the Syrian regular army. Russia adopted this policy after Bashar Assad had called Moscow for help due to the significant losses in his army and as a message that Iran had failed to achieve any progress for the Syrian regime on the ground. According to Russian deputy foreign minister, Michael Bogdanov, Russia responded to Assad's request to preserve the state's organizations, especially the Syrian army. He said that Russia would attack any armed groups outside the military institute and, at the same time, welcomed anyone who would like to join the Syrian regular army. This announcement opened the door for all options, including attacking Iranian armed groups and militias in Syria like the National Defense Army, People's Committees and 'Al-Ba'th' battalions, should they continue working independently. Furthermore, Russia was keen to establish a Syrian military council to restructure the Syrian national army beyond the control of Bashar Assad to preserve Syrian unity and, if necessary, re-enlist military personnel who resigned in protest against the regime's incorrect military practices, which contradicts the will of Assad and Iran.

After the Vienna conference, Russia classified the Syrian Free Army as a non-terrorist organization and decided to include it in politics and provide it with air support to confront ISIS. Indeed, Russia's rapprochement and cooperation with the opposition forces angered Iran and the Assad regime, especially after the chief of military operations in the Russian General Staff Headquarters, General André Kartabolov, announced on November 3, 2015 that Russian warplanes had attacked twenty-four ISIS positions defined by the Syrian opposition forces. Kartabolov also said, "Many times, we announced that we are ready to cooperate with opposition factions fighting ISIS and 'Al-Nusra' Front in Syria. I'd like to tell you that within the framework of the international counterterrorism coalition in the Middle East, we made contact with a number of leaders and field commanders of opposition forces." He added, "We have established a coordinating group to organize all joint efforts to confront ISIS, but we cannot disclose the structure of this group for certain reasons." Kartabolov also said that the Russian and American warplanes had conducted joint military exercises in Syria to avoid any clashes between the two sides.

Russian insistence on implementing the political solution based on the Vienna resolutions and conducting Syrian-Syrian talks between the regime and moderate opposition, including all Syrian social segments, increased the gap between Russia on one side and Iran and the Syrian regime on the other. In a phone call with his American counterpart John Kerry, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov was determined to have international support to settle the Syrian crisis through Syrian national talks between the regime and opposition representatives and unify all efforts to countering terrorism.²⁹

Iran declined conducting such negotiations and any direct or indirect talks with Washington on Syria, as stated by Ali Akbar Velayati, the Iranian Supreme Leader's Advisor for international affairs, after his meeting with Feisal Muqdad, the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister in Tehran. Velayati said that his country could not accept any initiative declined by the Syrian government and the Syrian people, while Iranian foreign minister

Mohammed Jawad Zarif supported the Syrian right for self-determination. At the same time, Tehran resumed its war of words against Washington when Khamenei reaffirmed Iran's position against the United States and re-raised the slogan "Death to America" that is, according to Iranians, inspired by the constitution. Speaking to thousands of university students at the national day anniversary for confronting the world's arrogant powers, Khamenei reassured the United States real goals toward the Iranian republic, saying that Americans were untrustworthy and will destroy Iran once they have the opportunity.

Tehran also heightened rhetoric against Moscow, as Iranian officials threatened to withdraw from the Vienna talks and the IRGC commander criticized the Russian strategy in Syria, saying that Russia works only for its own interests. Accordingly, Tehran no longer looked at Russia as a partner and ally in Syria, especially after the Russian initiative for a political settlement of the Syrian crisis was based on the principle "no victor no vanquished."³⁰

US-Turkish escalation against Russia in Syria and its reflection on Arab-Iran relations

The positions of Iran's regional and international rivals in Syria played a major role in determining Russia-Iran relations in this country. After an episode of cold relations as a result of the Vienna conference resolutions, Moscow and Tehran re-enhanced their bilateral relations for two reasons:

A. The shooting down of a Russian Sukhoi by the Turkish Air Force.

Russia's response to the Turkish shooting down of a Russian SU-24 warplane went in two directions; first, Russia enhanced its military presence in Syria by deploying state of the art weapons to tip the balance of power in favor of Moscow and its allies, Iran and the Syrian regular army. This step was exactly what Iran demanded during and after the Vienna conference: to pursue a military option and decline a political solution in Syria. Second, Moscow re-enhanced its bilateral relations with Tehran on all levels, including military cooperation against the opposition military factions and thwarting Turkish goals in Syria as well.

Russia was aware of Turkish goals in shooting down the Russian warplane. Turkey was keen to harm the morale of Russian president Vladimir Putin by shooting down the SU-24, considered a symbol of the Russian campaign in Syria. It also sought to deplete Russian diplomatic and military efforts directed to counterterrorism and political settlement of the Syrian crisis by soliciting Moscow for a confrontation beyond the Syrian borders and most importantly, force NATO to accept Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's plan for the establishment of a safe territory that extends from Jarabuls to the Mediterranean. As a result, Russia was keen to topple the Turkish plan by rescuing the second Russian pilot using Russian-Syrian Commandos successfully and frustrating the Turkish goal of dragging Moscow into a Russian-Atlantic war. Furthermore, Russia adopted the plan of the safe territory and, instead of imposing this territory near the Turkish borders, Moscow deployed S-300 and S-400 missiles, warplanes and T-980 tanks to confront ISIS and the other armed groups. Russia also adopted new procedures in its diplomatic confrontation with Turkey by imposing visa requirements on Turks visiting Russia starting

from 2016, threatening to close borders between Syria and Turkey as an important step to counterterrorism and launching air strikes on stolen oil from Syria that confused Turkey, as stated by Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov.

These developments led to a resumption of bilateral relations between Russia and Iran when Russian president Vladimir Putin visited Tehran on November 23, 2015, to attend the OPEC-Gas summit. On the sidelines of the summit, Putin met Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei and both discussed Russia-Iran bilateral relations, the Syrian crisis and their positions toward the United States.

“This visit established a strategic partnership between the two countries in the face of the US hegemony” President Putin said. He added that Moscow would lift the embargo on selling nuclear technologies to Tehran, saying that Moscow does not betray its allies as others do, referring to the United States. Moscow also opened the door for establishment of a free trade zone between Iran and the Eurasian union, enhanced cooperation among OPEC-Gas members given their weight in the world energy sector and enhanced economic integration between these members and the other economic blocs where Russia is a key player similar to the Shanghai Organization, Caucasus countries community, the BRIICS group and the Eurasian union.

In a meeting between Putin and the Iranian Supreme Leader, both discussed the Iranian post-nuclear deal era, Russia’s increasing involvement in the Syrian crisis, the possibility of Russian ground intervention in this country and the convergence of visions on the future of Bashar Assad, unlike the statement of the IRGC commander in this concern. Both sides had a common stand on this issue saying, “No one can impose anything on the Syrian people.” Furthermore, Khamenei praised Russia’s role in Syria and its position against the US plans when he talked to Putin, saying, “Americans always try to put their rivals in a state of confusion, but you ruined that policy.” He added, “The Russian decisions and actions in Syria enhanced Russia and President Putin’s regional and international credibility.”

On his part, Putin praised Iran and its leadership saying, “Iran is an independent nation with promising prospects.” He added, “Iran is a trustworthy reliable ally in the region and the world. On the contrary of others, we are committed toward our friends and do not betray them. Even when we disagree on certain issues, we come to the table and solve our disputes.”³¹

B. The US attack on the Syrian regular army in Deir ez-Zor.

Russia-Iran ties severed again over the priority of operations in Syria, despite attempts to find common ground between both sides. However, the US attack on a Syrian military camp on Saturday, August 17, 2016 in Deir ez-Zor tipped the balance of power again and forced Russia to intensify airstrikes against Syrian opposition to support Iran and its militias in Northern Syria, especially at the battles of Aleppo, where Russia and its allies achieved a great victory.

Russia-Iran relations continued wavering depending on regional and international developments. On August 16, 2016, the Russian minister of defense announced that Russian Tupolev-27 and U-34 took off from the Iranian air base Nogah in the city

of Hamadan northwestern Iran and bombed ISIS and the 'Al-Nusra' Front in Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, and Idled in Syria. This Russian announcement infuriated the Iranian political and military personnel, which obliged the Iranian government to contain the crisis and declare that it was a necessity for war in Syria, but not compromise on any of Iran's national foundations.³²

In response to the Russian announcement, Iran's Minister of defense criticized the Russian media and how it dealt with this issue. He said that the Russian procedures were irrational and came as a form of self-promotion when he said, "Of course Russians are eager to show themselves as a superpower and influential nation alongside their activities in the regional and world security issues."

The Iranian parliament also, as stated by Representative Hishmatollah Falahat, accused the Iranian government of breaking article 146 of the Iranian constitution, which prohibits the presence of any foreign military bases in Iran, even for peaceful purposes. On August 20, 2016, twenty Iranian representatives joined Falahat and called for a closed session to discuss this issue.³³

On his part, Ali Larijani, Speaker of the Iranian parliament, denied the presence of any foreign bases in Iran. On the contrary, Aladdin Brojardi, head of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee in parliament, said that the Russian warplanes took off from Hamadan airport to strike targets in Syria after approval of the Iranian Higher Council for National Security, which means that it was a governmental decision approved by president Hassan Rouhani who is, by law, chief of this council. In addition, this action received the approval of the chiefs of the three authorities—Executive, Legislative, and Judicial—the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, the Head of Budgetary and Planning Department, the two representatives of the Supreme Leader, the Army Chief, the IRGC Commander and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Security, who are all members of the council by law. Most importantly, this decision was approved by Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, since no decisions can pass without his approval.

Minister of Defense Hussein Dehghan responded to the parliamentary representatives' questions in the strongest terms and defended the positioning of the Russian warplanes at Hamadan airbase to launch attacks in Syria, saying that they did not break the law when they made this decision. Dehghan added that the Parliament had nothing to do with the decision, which heightened the Parliament's dissatisfaction. As a result, the legal advisor in the ministry of defense defended Dehghan when he said that the Minister's statement was misunderstood and what he was trying to say was that the decision did not need the approval of Parliament. However, these clarifications did not restrain the representatives' anger, which forced Larijani, despite his approval of Russia-Iran cooperation and the continuation of Russian warplanes launching from Hamadan airbase, to openly criticize the statements of the Iranian Minister of Defense when he said, "The minister's behavior was inappropriate and did not show respect to the council." The dispute between parliament and the government continued until a spokesperson of the Iranian government, Bahram Qassimi, announced, at a press conference on August 22, 2016, the halting of Russian warplanes from using the Iranian air base in Hamadan to launch strikes in Syria; he was quoted saying, "They have gone and their use of the base depends on the regional security developments and our permission."³⁴

This raises a question: since Russia-Iran military relations are tied to such sensitive factors, which level of relations between both sides can be materialized? Is building a strategic military alliance between them impossible, at least on the level of a selective strategic alliance?

Indeed, the US attacks on Deir ez-Zor contributed to the restoration of a certain form of alliance between Moscow and Tehran. Before the attacks, which were followed by the biggest ISIS offense on 'Deir ez-Zor' military airport, located on the outskirts of the city and separated between ISIS and the two remaining safe neighborhoods, some observers believed that the inherited mutual mistrust between Russia and Iran and the geopolitical factors remained the key determinants of Iran's decision-making. It was believed that this would prevent a strategic coalition between the two countries. In fact, Russia-Iran relations would remain tied to certain security issues and disagreement might result from other files.

Other Russian observers questioned the possibility of building strategic relations between Russia and Iran. Vladimir Sajin, an expert in the Middle East Institute, said on this issue, "Formally, Russia-Iran relations seem good. We have joint work in Syria to support Assad's regime despite our different views on the Syrian president." Sajin continued, "The positions of the two countries are similar on certain issues and differ on others; consequently, Russia and Iran cannot build strategic relations due to the many points of disagreement."

The state of doubt in Russia-Iran relations also included the United States, as Americans said they had reservations on Russian deployment of warplanes in Syria. The US Department of State said it was studying whether the Russian use of the Iranian air base violated Security Council resolution 2231, which banned selling weapons and warplanes to Iran without approval of the Security Council. When US Secretary of State John Kerry expressed his fears to his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, about the Russian use of the Iranian air base to launch attacks in Syria, the Russian minister responded severely when he highlighted the US military presence all over the world, invasion of many countries without permission from the Security Council and launching attacks in Syria without the authorization from a Syrian government that the US claimed had lost legitimacy. Lavrov also said, "The Russian warplanes on the Iranian base of Hamadan do not violate the Security Council resolution 2231. The Security Council resolution bans selling warplanes and arms and we did not violate this resolution because we did not sell arms or warplanes to Iran." He concluded, "The United States is trying to distract the attention from the main responsibility, which is to settle the Syrian crisis."³⁵

Tension after the battles of Aleppo

The Russia-Iran collaboration and its militias' cooperation peaked in the battles of Aleppo. However, this coordination faced many problems on the ground between Russia on one side and Iran, the Syrian army and militias on the other. Russia was keen for a political solution in Syria and sought to attract the United States as a partner to solve the Syrian problem and coordinate with Turkey, which supported the Russian plan for a political settlement. Turkey adopted this position after severing relations with the United States as a result of Washington's rapprochement with the Syrian Kurdish militias and the US rejection of handing the Kurdish opponent Fethullah Gülen

over to the Turkish government. However, Iran and the Syrian army were focused on the military option to recapture the opposition's territories after taking control of Aleppo and diminishing the Turkish role to exclude it from any political settlement in Syria. Accordingly, Russia-Iran relations severed because of three critical issues:

A. Disagreement on the Turkish role in Syria

Iran reluctantly accepted the inclusion of Turkey as a third sponsor in the Astana talks. Turkey imposed itself as a guarantor, alongside Russia and Iran, in the Astana talks through sponsoring the opposition delegate and coordinating with Russia to evacuate the opposition militants from Aleppo. Iran was aware that the Turkish operation "The Euphrates Shield" on August 24, 2016, would extend deep into Syria up to Aleppo, the ultimate Turkish target; this became evident when Turkey supported the opposition forces against the Syrian regime army in the Bab Battle in Northern Syria.

Russia supported the Turkish role in sponsoring negotiations between the Syrian regime and opposition alongside Iran in Astana, which heightened disagreement between Russia and Iran again.³⁶

Iran believed that the Turkish success in the Bab battle would achieve three Turkish goals and represent a setback for the Iran-backed Assad regime, mainly in the Astana talks and the ceasefire in Syria.

Turkey aimed at achieving two goals in this battle. Firstly, it sought to separate the Kurds in Kobani and Efrin to establish a safe zone, as discussed between Turkish President Erdogan and US President Donald Trump following his inauguration of the new US president. The second Turkish goal in the Bab battle was to approach Aleppo, where Russians, Iranians, Hezbollah, the Iraqi Shiite militias and the Syrian regime army had launched a decisive campaign to recapture this city from opposition forces. Indeed, the strategic battle of Bab would tip the balance of powers in Syria due to the presence of several powers with different goals, like the Syrian Democratic Forces—supported by the United States—that planned to enter the city from two directions, the Iranian and Syrian regime forces and their allies who were ahead of the other forces toward the city and the Turkish forces.³⁷ These developments made Iran call Turkey to review its regional policies³⁸ and warned Turkish officials from antagonizing Iran following Turkish foreign minister Mawlod Jawish Oglu's accusations at Tehran of turning Iraq and Syria into Shiite states.³⁹

Iran accused Turkey of occupying Syria and asked Ankara to leave as soon as possible—in reference to the Turkish involvement the Bab Battle—in response to the Turkish demands of Iran to exert pressure on the Lebanese Hezbollah to leave Syria. Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chief of the national security and foreign policy committee in the Iranian parliament, defended the presence of Hezbollah in Syria after his meeting with Bashar Assad in Damascus when he said, "We and Hezbollah are in Syria as advisors in coordination with the Syrian government and under its request; so, the others have to leave Syria because they came to this country without permission or coordination with its government."⁴⁰

B. Iran's rejection of the Russian willingness to involve the United States in the Astana talks

Russia defended its position and, at the same time, criticized Iran indirectly when Moscow announced that it had made all victories in Syria and had the right to make invitations to anyone to participate in negotiations, not Iran. These developments reflected a disagreement between both

sides on the Syrian crisis and their agendas in the post-Aleppo era; to continue military operations or negotiate a peaceful solution with the opposition. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov was clear when he defended his country's position, saying, "The goal of the Russian military presence in Syria was not to support the legitimate government and defeat direct threats. After the battle of Aleppo we can say that we have preserved the secular Syria and its sovereignty in compliance with the Security Council resolution 2254." He added, "Without the Russian interference, Damascus would have fallen in two or three weeks in the hands of terrorists." Lavrov's words were clear and he praised the Russian position over the Iranian one through imposing its conditions and bringing all concerned with the Syrian crisis to the table. Lavrov's statement came in response to the Iranian Tasnim news agency, which quoted the words of Iranian foreign minister Mohammed Jawad Zarif when he responded to a question about the US participation in Astana, "We did not invite the Americans; we reject their participation."⁴¹

Unlike in previous disputes with Tehran, Moscow was keen to illustrate this disagreement as a message, more to Americans than to Iranians, that Moscow is in control of conditions in Syria, which raises a question about the future of Russia-Iran relations. In an interview on a Russia channel, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said, "Iran rejected the American participation in Astana, but we had invited representatives of the US administration to these talks."

On the same issue, Russia's foreign minister Sergey Lavrov acknowledged the differences between Moscow and Tehran on this matter and said that settlement of the Syrian crisis could not come about with the participation of the United States. He added, "There is no need to make deals with the United States; we need cooperation."⁴² Indeed, Lavrov's statements reflected the Russian acceptance of an American role in Syria.

C. Russia-Israel understandings on what Israel believes are its rights in Syria or at least some gains in this country, especially Israeli supremacy over the Syrian Golan Heights.

Israel was keen to prevent Iran, Hezbollah and the Iranian militias from taking a foothold and imposing a permanent military presence or political influence in Syria, especially near the Golan Heights, to prevent creating new frontiers in Northern Israel on the model of South Lebanon. Israel also warned of establishing an Iranian permanent naval base near Latakia in Syria.⁴³

Iran pursued Benjamin Netanyahu's four visits to Moscow in 2016. However, the Iranian reactions to Netanyahu's first visit to Moscow on March 9, 2017, surprised Moscow due to the importance of this visit. In fact, this visit took place in the context of two Israeli strategic perceptions; the first was that the Syrian crisis had entered its final stage after six years of war and the allocating of gains by the victorious parties like Iran and its proxy Hezbollah. Indeed, Tel Aviv was keen to prevent and corner the Iranian influence in Syria in order to avoid tipping the balance of powers against Israel. The second is that Russia, but not the United States, had the final decision on Syria and would be the one to redistribute the spoils on all sides. In addition, the United States is not only helpless against Russia in Syria but also was not willing to confront Iran, neither in Syria nor anywhere else, which made Israel move toward Russia.

In his meeting with the Israeli cabinet before heading to Moscow, Netanyahu expressed the Israeli rejection of a permanent Iranian military presence in Syria that would open a new frontier against Israel in the Golan Heights. Netanyahu also aimed at negotiating an agreement with Moscow to avoid any future military clashes between Russia and Israel in Syria.

In fact, Netanyahu's visit to Moscow in 2017 differed from the previous four visits in 2016. In the first four, Netanyahu aimed at taking the Russian green light to strike certain targets in Syria, especially the advanced arms suppliers to Hezbollah, that would tip the balance of powers against Israel. Furthermore, Israel sought coordination with Russia to prevent any unintended clashes between Israeli and Russian warplanes in the Syrian airspace. However, the latest visit in 2017 concerned Israeli red lines against the Iranian presence in Syria in light of the recent developments and planning of the future of bilateral relations between Tehran and Damascus.

Likewise, Iran was aware of all these developments. It felt the gap with the Russian ally was increasing and sought to bridge this gap with Moscow as much as possible for two reasons. The first was Tehran's recognition that Russia is the strongest actor in Syria that would determine the course of settlement in this country. The second reason was that Tehran did not have a strong regional or international ally to count on in its project in Syria, especially after the deterioration of Iran's relations with Turkey and the GCC countries.

On March 2017, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani visited Moscow and met Russian president Vladimir Putin to save relations with Russia in light of the new Iranian rivals in Syria. Rouhani expressed his country's eagerness to cooperate with Moscow on countering terrorism in the whole region, hinted to some unresolved issues between the two countries and offered to grant Russia concessions to use Iranian military bases. On the sidelines of the visit, both sides signed fourteen memoranda of cooperation, including nuclear materials, infrastructures and Heavy industries. Moreover, Gas Prom Corporation—the biggest Russian gas producer—signed an agreement with the Iranian National Oil Company to cooperate in the natural gas sector.

The two presidents did not refer to the unresolved issues between them, but some Russian diplomats favored enhancing relations with Iran on regional and international issues. The final statement of the two presidents declared that both countries should respect the unity, independence and sovereignty of Syria, the necessity of a peaceful diplomatic solution in this country based on Security Council resolution 2254 and considered Russia, Iran and Turkey as guarantors of the Astana talks in order to reach a political solution in Syria. Most importantly, President Putin said that both countries were keen to build a strategic partnership, which was the first time he had described Russia's relations with Iran as strategic. Putin added that both countries agreed to boost economic cooperation, including in the nuclear sector, and urged the continuation of the war on ISIS and Al-Nusrah organizations and the normalization of relations between all Syrian parties.⁴⁴

Third: Future of Russia-Iran Relations

Regarding the future, the main question is whether Russia-Iran relations going towards breakup, strong relations or are they going to continue wavering between breakups and strong ties as in the past two years?

In order to answer this question, we developed the following conclusions:

A. Russia-Iran relations are based on mutual interests: some are agreed upon and others are still debatable between the two countries.

B. It does not matter whether Iran had called Russia to interfere in Syria or Russia came independently to this country under national will and a careful strategic read of its interests and sources of threat. Either way, Iran was of great importance for Russia on the military level over the

past two years. Iran has been in control of the ground forces and militias, while Russia defined its role on airstrikes. Indeed, they achieved success together and their rivalry led to setbacks for both of them.

C. In addition to its military role over the past two years in Syria, Iran is also a political ally of the Syrian regime in accomplishing diplomatic settlement under Russian administration. However, Iran is still an obstacle in the face of a Russian project that is bigger than the narrow alliance with Tehran.

D. Iran has strong competitors in Syria: the United States, Turkey and, to a lesser degree, Israel. Whenever Russia approaches these countries, it breaks with Iran.

E. The United States was determined to interfere in Syria, but only through an understanding with Russia. This was evident when Presidents Trump and Putin agreed on a ceasefire in Southern Syria as a beginning for further understandings between the two countries on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Hamburg, Germany.⁴⁵ However, the United States was keen to break the Russia-Iran coalition, which was evident when Washington announced it would never negotiate with Iran's allies, giving Russia one of two choices: Iran or the United States.⁴⁶

F. Turkey was keen to approach Russia. Some Russian officials called for a Russian-Turkish strategic alliance and considered Russia-Iran relations as limited and unable to reach the stage of a strategic alliance.⁴⁷ The agreement between Russian Gas Prom and Turkish Governmental Corporation for Pipelines "Potas" on financing the Turkish "Stream" gas project was a foundation for a strong partnership between the two countries. This project would achieve many gains for Russia by selling Russian gas to the European markets via Turkey, which would diminish the risks of transporting Russian gas via Ukraine.⁴⁸

All in all, given the Russian president's rapprochement with US president Donald Trump to gain American support for the Russian plan of peaceful settlement in Syria, the Israeli critical demands from Russia concerning the Iranian presence in this country, Russian assurances of preserving the security of Israel,⁴⁹ Russia-Turkey agreements to enhance bilateral relations and the US-Russia agreement on ceasefire in Southern Syria, specifically in Dar'a, As-Suwayda and Quneitrah, the next stage will be difficult for the Iranian decision maker concerning relations with Russia. Indeed, the presence of new Russian partners, the deterioration of the military option and a tendency toward a political solution has come to the forefront of the Syrian scene.

Russia-Iran relations are linked to US-Russia relations and will continue wavering between robust and severe ties. However, the common interests of the two countries will preserve Russia-Iran relations and prevent them from deteriorating to a level less than an alliance of necessity.

Endnotes

- (1) Ra'ed Jabr, "Russian-Iranian Relations are a Necessary Evil," *Al-Hayat*, February 6, 2017.
- (2) Nurhan Sheikh, "The Russian Position toward the Arab Revolutions: An Analytic Vision, the Strategic Report, 'the Nation and the Reality of Reform and Mechanisms of Change,'" *Al-Baiyan* 9 (2012): 275–277.
- (3) Ezzat Saad Al-Sayed, "Between Terrorist Expansion and Iranian Expansion: Russian Politics and Middle East Security," *Al-Siyasah Al-Dawliya* 201 (July 2015): 110–115.
- (4) "Iran and Egypt: Thorny Entry Points for Relations," *The Gulf Newspaper*, Feb. 23, 2013, <http://cutt.us/jfbyi>. With the publication of the message "Life is what is inspired by the mandate of the Jurist," the writer refutes the Iranians' reevaluation of the situation in relation to the Arab revolutions and with the proposed solution of confronting crises.
- (5) Talal Atrissi, "American Turnaround: Iran's Position and its Regional Role in the Strategies of Major Powers," *Al-Siyasah Al-Dawliya* 199 (January 2015): 31–35.
- (6) *Ibid.*, 33.
- (7) Izzat Saad al-Sayyid, "Between Terrorist Expansion and Iranian Expansion," 112.
- (8) Mohamed El-Said Abdelmoumen, "The Courageous Flexibility: Iranian Capabilities in Face of a Potential Historic Transformation," *Al-Siyasah Al-Dawliya* 199 (January 2015): 7.
- (9) *Ibid.*, 11.
- (10) Talal Atrissi, "American Turnaround," 31.
- (11) International Center for Future Studies, "Evolution of the Regional Role of Iran in Light of International and Regional Changes," (Cairo, unpublished study).
- (12) Iranian Const. art. 13, 76, <http://cutt.us/Sd25P>
- (13) International Center for Futures Studies, "Evolution of the Regional Role of Iran."
- (14) "Al-Jubeir: Iran's Greatest Sponsor of Terrorism and Dialogue Will Happen Only after Changing its Behavior," *Al-Hayat Daily*, February 20, 2017, 1.
- (15) The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, doubted the seriousness of any opportunity for Iranian cooperation with the United States as a result of the signing of the nuclear agreement. "The nuclear deal protected Iran from US military aggression," he said, describing the threats as an error. He asserted, "The aim of these threats is to divert attention from the real war, that is, the economic war, which is a priority." He added, "The enemy is planning in the near term to create chaos and strife in the country to deprive the Iranian Republic." He also said, "The enemy's long-term goal is to change the foundations of the Islamic regime." Moreover, he indicated that he had told officials, "There is no difference between the terms of regime change and regime behavior change." He also asserted that he had said, "Behavior change means getting away from Islam and Khomeini's line." See Khamenei's "The Military Options are False," *Al-Akhbar*, February 16, 2008; Mohammed Saleh Sadeqian, "Khamenei Considers that the Call for Iran's Behavior Change is not Very Different from Dropping the Regime," *Al-Hayat*, May 11, 2017.
- (16) Mohammad Reza Farqani, "Russian Aspirations to Support Strategic Relations with Iran," *Iranian Anthology* 172 (February 8, 2015): 61.
- (17) "Is Russia a True Friend for Iran? Iranian Diplomacy," *Iranian Anthology* 172 (February 8, 2015): 62–63.
- (18) *Ibid.*
- (19) These commitments to a sanctions policy on Iran were not easy for Russia. Rather, because of them, its economy suffered significant losses. See A. Balkanov, "The Iranian Key to the Middle East Door," *Russia in Global Affairs* 11 (October 27, 2013).

- (20) Izzat Saad al-Sayyid: "Between Terrorist Expansion and Iranian Expansion," 114.
- (21) Talal Atrissi, "American Turnaround," 34.
- (22) Mohammed Saleh Sadeqian, "Khamenei asked Putin to Intervene in Syria," *Al-Hayat*, August 19, 2016.
- (23) Amir Taheri. "Moscow is Pushing Tehran to the Shadow in Syria: Assad is Differentiating in Treatment between Them," *Middle East*, October 21, 2016.
- (24) *Ibid.*
- (25) Nasser Taffi Amri, "Is It Possible for the Russian Military Intervention to Change the Situation in Syria?," *Iranian Anthology* 179 (October 14, 2015), 24.
- (26) Mohammed al-Sa'eed Idris, "Tahadiat Iran fi Altahaluf Ma' Russia," *Majalt Mukhtarat Iraniah* 178 (September 2015): 6–9.
- (27) *Ibid.*
- (28) *Ibid.*, 9.
- (29) "Iran wa Sadmatuha fi Alhalif Alrusi," *Alkhaleej*, November 21, 2015.
- (30) Mohammed al-Sa'eed Idris, "Tahadiat Almasalih baina Itraf Salam Vienna wa Mustaqbal Altaswiyah Alsuriah," *Majalt Mukhtarat Iraniah* 179 (October 2015): 7.
- (31) *Ibid.*, 7–8.
- (32) Nourhan Alsheikh, "Asharq Alawsat Aljadeed Taquduho Russia," *Al-Ihram*, January 8, 2017.
- (33) The revelation of this information provoked a wide range of reactions; some defended the regime, and others analyzed the events to justify the cooperation. For more information, see Paul R. Pillar, "Saving Face in Tehran," *The National Interest*, August 24, 2016; Daniel R. Depetris, "3 Reasons Russia's Bombers in Iran Were a Big Deal," *The National Interest*, August 24, 2016.
- (34) Falih Alhamrani, "Nashr Almuqatilat Alrusiah fi Qa'idat Hamadan Al-Iranianh: Mu'ashir li Tahaluf Am Safqah Mu'aqatah?"
- (35) Mohammed Saleh Sidqian, "Khameini Talaba min Putin Altadakhul fi Suria," *Alhayat*; *Ibid.*
- (36) Mohammed al-Sa'eed Idris, "Alidwan Alamriki ala Deir Azzor wa Khayar Altahaluf Alistrategi Alintiqa'i baina Tehran wa Moscow," *Majalat Mukhtarat Iraniah* 178 (July 2016): 6–7.
- (37) See Baha' Abu Akram, "Altafahum Alturkey Alrusi wa Tumouhat Iran," *Alhayat*, January 17, 2017; Yahya Dabouq "Altamawdu' Alturkey fi Suria: La Tanazul an Alquah," *Alakhbar*, January 17, 2017; Mohammed Nouraddin, "Turkiah wa Halab: Umq Istratgy Istahal faji'ah Istratejiah," *Alsafeer*, December 10, 2016.
- (38) Najah Mohammed Ali, "Iran wa Turkia: Ma'rakat Kasr Adhm Am Tafahumat," *Alquds Alarabi*, February 18, 2017.
- (39) Mohammed Saleh Sidqian, "Tehran Tuhazir Ankara: Lissabr Hdoud," *Alhayat*, February 21, 2017.
- (40) "Iran Tatahim Turkia Bihtilal Suria," *Alhayat*, January 5, 2017.
- (41) *Ibid.*
- (42) Ra'ed Jabr and Mohammed Saleh Sidqian, "Tabaion Russi-Irani ala Da'wat America ila Astana," *Alhayat*, January 18, 2017.
- (43) Mohammed Bdeir, "Tahzerat Israeliah: Alqa'idah Aliranian fi Suria Khutwah Mutatarifah," *Alakhbar*, March 1, 2017.
- (44) Markiz Almustaqbal lilabhath Waddirasat Almutaqadimah (Abu Dhabi), "Hal Tusahim Ziarat Rouhani fi Taqlees Misahat Alkhilaf ma' Moscow?," *Alhayat*, March 29, 2017; Ra'ed Jabr, "Russia wa Iran Tata'ahadan Tasfiat Alirahab fi Almantiqah," *Alhayat*, March 29, 2017.
- (45) Baha' Abu Kroum, "Qimmat Alwaqi'iah fi Hamburg" *Alhayat*, July 14, 2017.
- (46) Alexander Atasontsef, "Russia Amam Muftaraq Turuq: Iran Am America?" *The Russian Gaztia Website*, February 23, 2017.
- (47) Baha' Abu Kroum, "Qimmat Alwaqi'iah fi Hamburg."
- (48) Zahra Kha' mohammadi, "Taqieem Athar Mashrou' Alsail Alturkey ala Istratejiat Tehran" *Strategic Report* 237 (November 2016); *Majalat Mukhtarat Iraniah* 189 (October 2016), 32–33
- (49) Ra'ed Jabr, "Moscow Tata'ahad Mura'at Almutatalabat Alamniah li Israel," *Alhayat*, July 18, 2017.