

**STUDY**

# Horizons of the Strategic Russian- Iranian Self-Serving Partnership in Syria

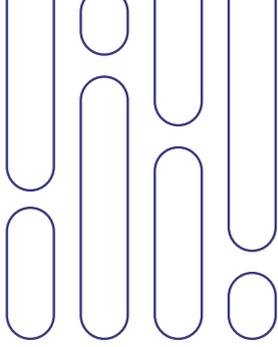
29 July 2020

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## Introduction

While the world is busy fighting COVID-19, Russia and Iran are striving to keep Syria in perpetual chaos for their own interests. This became obvious during their official visits to Syria. Russia's Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Damascus on March 23, 2020 and Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif met with Syria's President Bashar al-Assad on April 20, 2020. During his visit, Shoigu urged Assad not to support the Iranians in their escalatory actions in the country, stressing that Russia will not allow the Russian-Turkish ceasefire deal on Idlib to be broken. Zarif's visit came at a time when Iran needed to discuss and highlight what it believes to be the actual facts in regard to its exclusion from the current understandings between Moscow and Washington on one side and from the talks between Tel Aviv and Moscow on the other side. Tehran is also concerned about being excluded from the latest Russian-Turkish understandings and plans for Idlib and other issues in Syria.

These two visits happened at a time when the whole world was completely preoccupied with the COVID-19 catastrophe and its harsh economic ramifications; international conflicts are not receiving much attention due to the pandemic. Seemingly, the Moscow-Tehran differences on Syria have reached a crossroad. Moscow used the word 'coordination' to describe its relationship with Tehran and dismissed claims that it had reached the level of a strategic alliance. What is the nature of these differences? What are their perspectives and prospects?

First and foremost, it is necessary to state that the Russia-Iran relationship is founded on common interests; military and security cooperation serving their long-standing joint perspective towards what they call “the common Western enemy.” In addition, they also cooperate to fight a common enemy that they call “Islamic Jihadism” referring to Sunni organizations. Russia considers Islamic groups a major threat to its national security as it is concerned about these groups having established links with their counterparts in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Since their unwavering support to Assad at the beginning of the Syrian uprising to save his government from collapsing in 2011, Russia and Iran have coordinated their efforts despite some tactical differences which they have resolved through political understandings — without unravelling their mutual self-serving partnership.

They would have continued to resolve their differences, but due to political and military developments, the crisis reached a climax and competition over gaining a share in Syria’s reconstruction led to the exacerbation of differences between the two countries. This is a normal occurrence, particularly when the time to reap gains and distribute the spoils of war draws closer. Since 2014, Russia-Iran differences in relation to the nature of the upcoming Syrian political system have clearly surfaced. They have differed on the future of Syrian statehood, Bashar al-Assad remaining in power, the identity of Syria’s military establishment, the structure of state institutions, the deployment of their respective forces, the presence of foreign forces and mercenaries in Syria, and reconstruction projects. Their differences were starkly highlighted during the discussions held between Russia and Turkey, America, and Israel. Iran was concerned about the negative impact of these differences on its future interests in Syria.

## **I. Russia’s Coordination With Regional and International Powers Away From Iran**

Iran’s most worrying concern is the latest Russian discussions leading to communication channels being opened with all regional and international powers involved in the Syrian crisis, including Iran’s top enemies; Israel and America. According to Iran, Russia is working to entrench its role as an

unbeatable power in the Syrian equation and to be a key player in the post-conflict phase; as the Syrian regime has reclaimed most of its territories and the final political settlement is quickly approaching.

Therefore, many Iranian lawmakers and government's officials have expressed on many occasions that Russia intends to control Syria and shun Iran as it carries out talks with Turkey, Israel and America.<sup>1</sup> Despite the protocols, the Russians have always dealt with Iran as a secondary player in the Syrian conflict. According to observers, Russia has hesitated to include Iran in all the agreements in relation to resolving the Syrian conflict.

### **1. Russian-Turkish Rapprochement Raises Iran's Concerns**

Iran is concerned about the growing Russian-Turkish rapprochement because its ambitions clash with Turkey's interests on many issues. The Iranians fully realize the historical significance of the Turkish Ottoman empire that defeated and ruled (1299-1923) 10 countries neighboring Iran except for Russia. Turkey is still a powerful historical and strategic competitor with Iran for influence and expansion in the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula. The Iranians are afraid that history will repeat itself and Ankara will rise again as one of the largest strategic obstacles in Syria. Ankara possesses powerful levers to entrench itself in Syria; most prominently its NATO membership, and its strong partnership with Moscow to tackle the Syrian crisis. In addition, Turkey has strong justifications to intervene in Syria to safeguard its borders, and a majority of Turks and Syrians are Sunnis.

Hossein Karimi, an Iranian writer, argues that the Turkish danger in Syria stems from its intention to dismember Idlib. In 1939, Iskenderun was annexed by Turkey. Now the Turks seek to dismember Idlib to annex the province in order to establish a road connecting Turkey to Syria and Jordan reaching out to all countries in the Middle East. With claims of historical rights, the Turks have always had ambitions to annex Syrian territories. Turkish officials have repeatedly expressed their historical rights in Kirkuk and Mosul in Iraq. Karimi states that the Iranians rejected the Turkish claims because, according to their view, it will instigate a crisis in the Middle East. The Iranians also oppose Turkish attempts to increase the participation of Turkmen in Syria. A majority of political and military groups comprised of

Turkmen work under Turkish patronage; most of them receive direct orders from Turkish intelligence. Furthermore, Turkey had previously armed the Turkmen under the pretext of sending humanitarian aid.<sup>2</sup>

According to Karimi, “The Turkish and Iranian interests clash on the formation of the Syrian government. History has witnessed many religious and sectarian differences between the Safavid [Shiite] Empire and the Ottoman [Sunni] Empire. When the latter had fallen and Turkey rose again, with aspects of Westernization, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Turkish government pursued a different path.”<sup>3</sup> Karimi continues to say, “When Iran was under the Pahlavi reign, which also had inclinations towards the West, the two countries had not faced religious conflict, especially after Turkey turned into a secular state. However, following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 things changed. The Islamic caliphate returned to Iran under a theocratic governance. Turkish officials spoke about the danger posed by Shiites to Turkey and their concerns about the Iranian [Islamic] component. Turkey is concerned about Syria being governed by a pro-Iranian sectarian ruling system that would likely emerge in Syria, threatening Turkey in the future — given Iran’s refusal to form a secular political system in Syria.”<sup>4</sup>

The major source of Iran’s concerns is that there is a kind of implicit convergence between the Russians and Turks on the future of Syria, and that they both intend to terminate completely Iran’s presence in the northern parts of Syria. They also seek to compel Iranian forces to withdraw from these territories. Perhaps they are planning to achieve a further goal to expel Iranian forces from all Syrian territory.

As a matter of fact, since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the Turks have worked to impose cultural and demographic change in northern Syria. The Turks do not accept, even at a minimum level, the Iranian presence not only in northern Syria but most likely all over the country. They have been Turkishizing the demographic identity of the population and territories in Syria’s border regions. The main goal behind this is to form Arab communities submissive to Turkey in Syria’s border regions; to continue the influence of Turkey-backed organizations in Idlib in the post-political settlement phase; and to prevent the Syrian regime from running Idlib as a province in the future Syrian state. The Turks intend to place Idlib under the

grip of Turkish-backed political and military groups. Many of those living now in Idlib are not native residents; they are members of various military and political organizations that have been deployed from across Syria to Idlib over the past few years.<sup>5</sup> The Iranians, of course, are worried about these never-ending Turkish activities amid Russia's silence. In December 2017, the Turks and Iranians worked together to thwart Kurdistan's referendum in Iraq. They are now coordinating their efforts to curb the expanding influence of Kurdish forces in northern Syria. As members of the Astana talks, they have cooperated to forge a political settlement in Syria. Despite the aforementioned mutual cooperation, competition has increased in Syria as their deeply rooted differences over the political settlement have surfaced. On April 14, 2018 the US, British and French forces launched airstrikes targeting sites in Damascus and Homs to punish Bashar al-Assad for using internationally banned chemical weapons against civilians. This attack shows that the Turks have not only excluded Iranians from their coordination with the Russians, but they also have unilateral strategic options with the West; their NATO allies. The consequences of the tripartite airstrikes confirmed that the Turkish-Iranian alliance in Syria is not strategic but merely tactical and temporary. It is doomed to end once its motives have ended, Therefore, the Iranians look at Turkey as an unreliable player that has its own agenda.

Moreover, the Iranians explicitly condemned the Turkish military operation in northern Syria on October 9, 2019 dubbed as 'Operation Peace Spring.' They took several steps to attempt to send messages to the Turks that they do not support their ongoing security arrangements in northern Syria — even though the Russians and Americans have not objected to Turkish maneuvers in Syria. At the current time, to express their rejection of the Turkish military operation, the Iranians cancelled the visit of the former Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani to Istanbul, which was scheduled to start simultaneously with the military operation — Larijani was invited by his Turkish counterpart to attend a parliamentary meeting. Iranian media outlets launched a strong campaign against Turkey and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. On October 8, 2019, the state-run Farhikhtegan daily published a front page editorial titled, "The Power in Service for Terrorism," with a photo of President Erdogan. The editorial stated that the military

operations will give “CPR to terrorism.”<sup>6</sup>

According to some media outlets, the latest visit of Zarif to Damascus was to express the extent of his country’s annoyance with the ongoing military operation in northern Syria as well as the exclusion of Iran from the current Russian-Turkish understandings, in particular those in relation to Idlib — concluded on March 5, 2020. The Iranians have realized that they are powerless in the Astana talks. They are not part of the joint Russia-Turkey patrols and have been excluded from their current military arrangements. The latest Russian agreement has allowed Turkey to increase its military capacity to 16,000 troops in addition to a large quantity of military equipment and tanks in northern-west Syria. The Iranians informed the Syrians that it is essential to make the deal on Idlib temporary and prevent the Turks from establishing a permanent presence there.<sup>7</sup>

The Iranians are still keen to highlight that leaving Idlib without a settlement is extremely dangerous as it would hamper future political and security arrangements in Syria. The Idlib crisis is a far more urgent matter than the Turkish claims of Kurdish militias posing a danger near its borders. According to some political currents in Iran, through this operation, the Turks aim to deflect attention from Idlib, which has turned into a ‘melting pot for jihadists’ under the tight grip of terrorist organizations. The Iranians, Russians and the Syrian regime have attempted to put Idlib high on their agenda to eliminate the organizations embedded there and expand the control of the regular forces on the ground.<sup>8</sup>

The ongoing military escalation in Idlib, northwest Syria, brought the cosmetic ‘friendliness’ between the Turks and Iranians to an end and exposed their deeply rooted differences. The Lebanese Hezbollah party, fighting alongside the Syrian regime, was targeted by Turkish airstrikes; an attack which provoked the Iranians who sent a warning signal to Ankara. The airstrikes by Turkey’s air forces on the territories stretching from Maarrat al-Nu’man to Saraqib in southeast Idlib killed nearly 15 fighters of the Lebanese Hezbollah, including field commanders and destroyed huge quantities of the party’s equipment and ammunition.<sup>9</sup>

The Turks, while targeting Iran and Hezbollah backed forces, are not concerned because they are not incurring the ire of the Americans who are keen under the Trump administration to curb Iran's influence and terminate its proxies in the region. They also know that the Russians are unconcerned about the strikes against Hezbollah militias in Syria because Israel had repeatedly targeted Iranian sites in Syria through airstrikes, and the Russians did not respond. Practically, Iran, following the Turkish airstrikes against its strongest proxy in the region, Hezbollah, has been in direct confrontation with Turkey.

Despite their discontent in regard to the latest Turkish understandings with the Russians and the military operations, the Iranians have shown a keen interest to maintain their relations with the Turks at different levels. They claim that their relations with the Turks are positive, adding that they would broker peace between Turkey on one side and the Syrian regime and the Kurds on the other. Iran does not intend to risk its relations with Turkey nor give up on Ankara. Amid the regional and international pressure, Iran does not have much room to maneuver in Syria. Iran will probably need Ankara to play a mediating role in regard to its nuclear file as it previously did in helping Tehran to address the economic ramifications of US sanctions and overcome other issues in Iraq and Syria. Iran relies on Turkish support to address any attempt by the Arabs to establish rapprochement with Iraq or play a significant role in Syria's future, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

## **2- The Priority of Israel's Security in Russia's Agenda**

According to Iran, the second source of concern is that Israel's security is a top priority for Russia. On October 10, 2015, the Russian Defense Ministry announced that the Russian Army established a "direct line" of communication with the Israeli Army to coordinate their operations to avoid any potential clash between the Russian and Israeli armies. The direct line coordinates between the Russian Khmeimim airbase in Latakia and the Israeli Air Force headquarters.<sup>10</sup> Russia aims via this coordination to protect its army from Israeli raids against Iranian sites as well as to ensure the raids do not harm the Assad regime's headquarters. This coordination, according to Iran, is a Russian green light for Israel to strike its forces and Hezbollah's militias.

On August 29, 2018, Israeli media outlets reported that an agreement was concluded between Moscow and Tel Aviv to pull back all Iran-backed forces and Hezbollah's militias to a distance of 85 kilometers (53 miles) from the Golan Heights frontier between Israel and Syria and to hand the southern Syrian territories, close to the Golan Heights, to Syrian regime's forces. In return, Israel will stop its raids against Iranian sites in Syria. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that only the Syrian regime troops should have a presence on Syria's southern border. "Of course, the withdrawal of all non-Syrian forces must be carried out on a mutual basis, this should be a two-way street," Lavrov added.<sup>11</sup>

The Israelis consider, as expressed by the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, that the Iranian presence in Syria is a threat to Israel. The Israelis are keen to decisively address Iran's rising threat in Syria. The Israelis intend to prevent the Iranians from creeping towards the Israeli border in the Golan Heights and deter them from establishing a new northern front in addition to their southern front in Gaza; cut the flow of arms from Iran to Hezbollah via Syria; destroy the Iranian facilities designed to develop precision missiles for Hezbollah; curb Iran from establishing a land corridor connecting Tehran to the Mediterranean coast and Beirut via Iraq and Syria; and end the threat of Iranian missiles deployed in Syria and Lebanon.<sup>12</sup>

Russian-Israeli coordination has reached a formal level. In 2019, an Israel-Russian-US security summit was hosted in Israel to discuss the future of Syria. The Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, "There is an Israeli-US-Russian agreement to expel Iran from Syria, but we have not agreed how to implement it." The same statement was expressed by the Israeli Minister of Defense Naftali Bennett on February 19, 2020 who said his country will change its strategy towards Tehran from defense to confrontation, stressing that they aim to expel Iranian forces from Syria. He also announced the United States and Israel agreed that Tel Aviv will take responsibility for countering the Islamic Republic in Syria and the United States in Iraq."<sup>13</sup>

Following the Israeli elections in March 2020, Israeli raids against Iranian sites in Syria increased, targeting Iranian advisers and commanders, and Hezbollah's sites — amid increasing US pressure on Iran after the killing of the IRGC's Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani in a drone strike near

Baghdad International Airport. In this context, the Institute for National Security Studies, an Israeli think tank, published a futuristic study proposing a series of recommendations for the new 2020 Israeli government. The study discusses the best methods to coordinate with the Russians to curb Iran's influence in Syria. The following are the study's recommendations to the new Israeli government in regard to Russian coordination:

- A. "The new government should make a renewed effort to enlist Russia in an effort to scale back Iranian influence and military intervention in Syria;
- B. an attempt should also be made to influence the Syrian army's buildup, and prevent its acquisition of advanced weapons;
- C. Israel should try to induce Russia to use its influence to disarm pro-Iranian militias in the Syrian defense organs;
- D. coordination with the Russian army should be maintained in order to preserve Israel's operational freedom of action;
- E. and avoid friction and form a common intelligence picture of Iranian subversion (as this too runs counter to Russian interests)."<sup>14</sup>

Part of the Russian-Israeli coordination, the Russian S-300 air defense systems deployed across all of Syria did not intercept any of the large-scale strikes Israel launched against Iranian sites, arms convoys and Hezbollah's arms depots. Their coordination went further, they conducted joint air raids against Iranian militias and Hezbollah's units.

### **3- Moscow Bringing Washington Back Into the Syrian Crisis**

The third source of concern according to the Iranians here is that the Russians paved the way for the United States to re-enter the Syrian crisis. Apparently, the Iranians are uneasy about the agreements Moscow concluded with America on February 27, 2016 including the Idlib ceasefire deal and the de-escalation zone negotiations. The Iranian representative at the sixth round of the Astana talks mentioned that an agreement on Idlib had not been reached, and threatened that Iran would thwart the Moscow-American agreement.<sup>15</sup>

Iran's concerns have increased in regard to the growing Russian-American understandings on Syria's future. In addition, they are concerned about the

fate of Assad in the country's 2021 presidential elections after the Russians indicated that they may give up on Assad in the upcoming phase. A harsh anti-Assad campaign was launched by Russian media outlets. They doubted his ability to rule Syria as he blundered in controlling the liberated areas and failed to advance the country's reform plan or draft a new Constitution.

According to a survey in regard to Assad's popularity — the poll included 1,000 Syrians living in regime-controlled territories, published by the Kremlin-linked RIA Fan news agency on April 20, 2020 — 31.4 percent approved of Assad as president while 41.3 percent had a negative opinion, and the rest refused to answer.<sup>16</sup>

The Russians know that the international community will not accept Assad in power in the next phase of Syria. They also realize that the reconstruction of Syria is difficult to achieve without the Americans who reject Iran's role in Syria and the withdrawal of their troops from Syrian oil fields and al-Tanf garrison — which is a threat to Iran.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, Russia is aware of its role as a great power amongst competing international powers. It has its own strategic and economic calculations different from those of Iran. Russia has learnt important lessons from its dramatic invasion of Afghanistan and the Cold War with America as well as from witnessing the Americans mired in 'the Vietnamese swamp' and later getting stuck in 'the Iraqi mud.' Thus, Moscow is mindful that military operations must stop once steps towards peace are taken, even at a relative level. Russia has reached its climax in the Syrian crisis and is afraid of reaching a state of 'complete strategic fragility.' Russia is exhausted financially, following the economic ramifications of the coronavirus pandemic and the sharp fall in oil prices. The time has come to reap its gains from its promising investments in Syria's reconstruction projects. Therefore, Russia now has become keener to forge a political alliance to revive the Astana peace talks and eventually reach a political settlement. Meanwhile, the Iranians have felt the need for more time to deeper entrench their influence in Syria and gain a significant foothold in the country. They are also aware that their sectarian project will end with the return of peace and stability. They fuel it with chaos as in the case of Yemen and Iraq, so this project cannot last for long in a modern state. The Iranians have become convinced that the political settlements currently do not serve their

interests. Thus, they continue to militarize the Syrian conflict to expand their spheres of influence via their forces throughout Syria, particularly in Eastern Ghouta, Idlib and Daraa.

The Iranian people have been unable to deter their government from pursuing its expansionist activities; every now and then they take to the streets, protesting against their money being spent on fruitless projects abroad. Iran has organized, trained, and funded over 100,000 Shiite fighters in Syria. They are embedded in the so-called National Defense Forces (NDF)<sup>18</sup> – which has been operating under Iranian forces since its establishment in 2012. The IRGC and militia fighters, recruited from chaos-hit countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and others, are estimated to number 20,000 fighters including 2,000 Iranian officers and soldiers and 7,500 Hezbollah elements.<sup>19</sup> The People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI-MEK), an exiled opposition group, estimated the number at 70,000 fighters, including 20,000 Iraqi militia fighters and nearly the same number of Afghan fighters, 7,000 Pakistani fighters, and 10,000 Hezbollah militants.<sup>20</sup> The death toll of these fighters reached 2,000, including IRGC top-ranked commanders.<sup>21</sup> And without a doubt to compensate for its losses, Iran is seeking financial returns and investment opportunities from the Syrian regime.

Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, a member of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee said in May 2020 that Iran should restore the people's money spent in Syria. Amid the country's economic deterioration, Iran funded the Syrian regime with approximately \$20 billion to \$30 billion. This money must be returned to the people.<sup>22</sup>

Based on the aforementioned analysis, Russian-Iranian political differences mainly stem from excluding Tehran from the talks Moscow is currently carrying out with regional and international powers. However, Assad's future in Syria remains the source of their disagreement. According to the Russians, Assad's role is not crucial anymore, as we discussed earlier. Perhaps, Assad's removal from power is better for the Russians who are fully aware of the pressure he is facing from the Iranians and his Alawite sect in particular. If Assad meets Iran's demands regarding a share in Syria's reconstruction and allows Iran to continue furthering its influence in Syria, he will definitely endanger Russia's gains in Syria.

Conversely, according to the Iranians, Assad's fate is a red line; democratic elections in Syria will definitely lead to a Sunni government since the majority of Syrians are Sunnis — 76.1 percent of the Syrian population are Sunni, 11 percent Alawites, and 0.4 percent Shiites. Even if the future Syrian Constitution is drafted like that of Lebanon and Iraq – based on a sectarian quota system – the writers of the Constitution are likely to be Sunnis or secularists. Thus, in both cases, Iran's role is likely to shrink not only in Syria but probably in Lebanon too.

## **II. Disagreement on the Future of Iranian Militias**

The second disagreement is on Russia's desire to limit militias in Syria while Iran continues to entrench its military presence to forge a power base parallel to that of Russia.

The Russians have placed pressure on the Syrian regime to restructure its security forces and sovereign institutions to exclude and undermine the influence of Iran-backed forces in Syria and unite Syrian army factions to serve their interests. Evidently, the Russian goal aligns with Israeli demands.

The Russians and Americans also agree on limiting the presence of militias in Syria. The US envoy to Syria James Jeffrey said that the United States supports “in every possible way” diplomatically and logistically Israeli raids on Iranian sites in Syria. He asserted that all foreign forces that entered after 2011 must leave Syria, including Turkish, Iranian and US forces — except for Russia as it entered before 2011.<sup>23</sup> Later, Russian President Vladimir Putin in May 2018 told Assad that all “foreign armed forces” have to leave Syria — referring to Iranian-backed militias. The Russian Air Force targeted Iranian sites in Homs and launched airstrikes on more than one occasion against Hezbollah's sites in the towns of Nubl and Al-Zahra in northern Aleppo and Hama.<sup>24</sup> According to a report published by the International Institute for Iranian Studies (Rasanah), Russian-Iranian tensions have escalated further following the clashes which erupted in January 2019 between the 4th Division led by Maher al-Assad (loyal to Iran) and the 5th Division led by the Commander of the Tiger Forces Major General Suheil Salman al-Hassan (loyal to Russia). This was part of their conflict over their respective spheres of influence in the northwest on the outskirts of Hama.

As a result, in May 2019, the Russians increased pressure on the Assad regime to restructure the 4th Armored Division and its sub-units: the Division Chief of Staff; and its Organizational and Administrative Unit, as well as its Military Security and Intelligence leadership and the Republican Guard. This is to unite loyalties under Moscow's control and to ensure that the 4th Division – the most equipped, armed and deeply-rooted group in Syria and the closest to Iran by virtue of its sectarian composition – is broken up. Some Syrian military officers were detained and brought to trial over corruption charges while others were suspended. Some of the officers and soldiers led by Maher al-Assad were sent to other military divisions.<sup>25</sup>

Tensions rose again following the clashes between Russian forces and Iranian-backed militias at Aleppo International Airport in May 2019. The Russian military police launched a raid against Iranian-backed militiamen stationed at the airport. Heavy and light weapons were used in the clashes, killing and injuring several militiamen. The Russian military police arrested a number of Iranian militia leaders.<sup>26</sup>

As part of its efforts to undermine Iran's influence in Syria and Assad's militias and security forces, Russia asked Assad, under the pretext of the coronavirus crisis, to restructure Russian-backed military units and separate them from Iranian forces. Russian forces, stationed in Mayadeen city in the eastern suburbs of Deir Ezzor, removed the flags and banners of the Iranian militias in the areas of al-Kurnish street and al-Bal'oum roundabout in the city. They kept the internationally recognized Syrian flag, along with hanging pictures of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and raised the Russian flag.<sup>27</sup>

The Russians seek to restructure the Syrian Army because it is the organization that is able to entrench 'Russian' peace and can help them to stabilize their influence in the long run since the army falls under the remit of the Constitution and the political authority. Conversely, the regular army, according to the Iranians, is a threat to their influence in Syria. A free army independent from Iranian influence will clash with Iran, reject the operations of its militias, and negate its demographic change projects.<sup>28</sup>

Though the Russians support the task of fighting opposition forces and reject militia expansion, they were strongly compelled to create Russian-

backed militias to confront the expansion of Iranian-backed militias. Iran's attempt to duplicate its Iraqi experience in Syria – creating sectarian militias in Syria – pushed the Russians to create militias across variant regions in Syria: the Tiger Forces [Quwwat al-Nimr], the Desert Hawks Brigade, the Daesh Hunters, the Jerusalem Brigade [Liwa al-Quds], the Asasinah Brigade, the Alberi Brigade, and the 5th Brigade. These militias consists of 25,000 soldiers recruited from militias that had concluded a settlement with the regime in Southern Syria and are completely supervised, trained and instructed by Russian forces.<sup>29</sup> Most of the Russian and Iranian-backed militias have exercised wide ranging powers that have enabled them to monopolize essential public resources such as bread, water, fuel, and public hospitals – dimming the Assad regime's power – as the revenues received have been shared with the Assad regime. According to an Iranian media outlet, Moscow asked Assad to depend to a larger extent on himself because Russian military support will be for a short time. Though Russia and Iran have many advisers in security apparatuses, they will face several obstacles in retaining their advisory positions in Syria.<sup>30</sup>

The Russian-Israeli raids against Iran's militias have not curbed Iran from strengthening its military sites with new missiles and arms to impose a military reality to influence the political balances that do not align with its interests. Iran has increased its shipments of arms to Syria via its militias under the supervision of the IRGC's Quds Force and through excavating tunnels at its Imam Ali military base in Syria near the Iraqi border to transfer missiles and drones to its militias and to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran aims to boost the militarization of Shiite groups to impose its own military reality to change the rules of the game in Syria which benefit Russia and its allies. These rules were formed without Iranian involvement.<sup>31</sup>

A study by the Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies tracked Iranian bases across Syria, unveiling the types of weapons that Iranian militias possess. The Imam Ali military base is the largest and the most geo-strategically significant base Iran built in Syria. Since it is quite near the Qaim border-crossing of Iraq –which is very significant for transferring weapons to Syria – the base plays an integral role in serving Iran's interests in both Syria and Iraq. The base was established under the supervision of the Quds Force to house thousands of soldiers and Iranian-backed forces.

This is the first base Iran built from scratch. It is 320 kilometers away from the US military base, al-Tanf. It has 15 military facilities which include 10 warehouses, training fields, and military headquarters for the IRGC and Iranian-backed militias, most prominently the Fatemiyoun militia. Five of these military facilities have advanced missile launch-pads.<sup>32</sup>

Earlier, the Iranians had placed pressure on the Syrian regime to hold discussions with the Russians regarding the establishment of an airbase in Qalamoun and a naval base in the coastal city of Baniyas for Iran like the Russian Tartus naval base and Khmeimim air base. However, the Russians rejected the Iranian request, invoking the international rejection of any Iranian presence in the Mediterranean Sea. The Russians will not allow any outcome that will help the Iranians strengthen their influence further in Syria and are likely to thwart their demands in the awaited political settlement to the Syrian crisis, which the Russians seek to finalize with the Americans and the Turks.<sup>33</sup>

### **III. The Conflict Over Syria's Wealth and Economy**

The second conflict between Tehran and Moscow is their clashing ambitions in regard to Syria's economy. The Iranians believe that the Russians took the lion's share of the Syrian economy; therefore, they asked for financial compensation to cover the blood and money they spent to keep the Assad regime in power and thwart opposition forces. On March 27, 2018, the People's Council of Syria ratified a 50-year contract with Russia's Sroytransgaz to mine phosphates — from the Khunayfis mine and al-Sharqiyah (As Sawwanah) mines, 45 kilometers away from the southwest of Palmyra — out of geological reserves of approximately 105 million tons. To halt the Iranian agitation, the Syrian regime concluded investment projects with the Iranians as well to mine phosphates; they were given thousands of hectares of agricultural lands and 1,000 hectares to establish refineries and oil facilities.<sup>34</sup> In May 2020, Iran was granted a contract for oil exploration on the Syrian-Iraqi borders and a license to operate a mobile-network — based on five MoUs the Syrian regime concluded with Iran on January 17, 2019. To secure a foothold on the Mediterranean coastline, the Iranians were granted a right from the Syrian regime to benefit from Latakia port and the Homs refinery. The Iranians want Latakia port to be the last station of its railway network extending from Iran

to Syria through Iraq. The Iranian Minister Roads and Head of Iran Railways Saeed Rasouli, when meeting his Syrian and Iraqi counterparts, stated that Iran's railway starts from Imam Khomeini Port in Iran passing through Shalamcheh on the Iraqi border to Basra and will reach to Latakia port in Syria.<sup>35</sup> Without a doubt, according to the Russians, an Iranian base next to their base in Tartus is a threat that may pose a risk to their forces if any tension erupts between Israel and Iran or between the United States and Iran. The Russians want to be the ultimate power on the eastern coastline of the Mediterranean without any competitor or obstacles.

Furthermore, the Iranians, through such infrastructure projects, aim to stay in Syria for a long time. Since the eruption of the Syrian crisis, IRGC-affiliated firms have purchased real estate in Damascus, especially in the Ancient City of Damascus, regained control over territories on the outskirts of the Syrian capital and have established stock farms. In March 2019, as part of Iran's ongoing project of demographic change and systematic resettlement in Syria, an Iranian firm announced to develop 200,000 residential units, most of them in Damascus, and Iranian-backed militias tightened their grip over Shiite holy shrines in Damascus and Homs.<sup>36</sup> Most Damascus residents, for hundreds of years, have been Sunnis. In recent years, many Iranian, Afghan and Syrian Shiites have moved to Damascus. Many of the Syrian capital's Christians and non-Muslims fled abroad after the war. For example, many Syrian Christians sold their properties to Syrian Shiites, whose number is very small, but they have strong connections with Iran.

Before 2011, 30 years had passed since the establishment of the Syrian-Iranian strategic alliance; however, Syria – back then – had very few commercial dealings with Iran because it does not share a land border with Iran. After the eruption of the Syrian crisis, things changed. Iran lent Syria \$5.6 billion during the past 10 years, most of this money was spent exporting crude oil, oil products, equipment and machinery from Iran. According to a Syrian research center, in 2017, Syrian imports from Iran in 2017 were estimated at \$1.3 billion. Syria exported goods to Iran worth only \$13 million in the same year, which is 100 times less than Iranian exports to Syria, i.e., 2 percent less.<sup>37</sup>

Their mutual economic relationship relies on three lines of credit\* which Iran granted to Syria during the past decade. The biggest loan Iran gave to Syria was in July 2013, \$3.6 billion mainly for petroleum exports. The two

other credit lines were \$1 billion each. In electricity, the Iranian mega Mapna Group Company signed three contracts to establish power stations in Tishreen, Homs and Latakia. The Syria Report, an economic news and data analysis website, published interesting information on the Iranian power stations, stating, “Establishing a power plant in Latakia is a project with of \$441 million that started in 2019. It was planned to be completed within three years; but due to the lack of liquidity in both countries, the project is not likely to continue forward.”<sup>38</sup>

Anyway, as some Iranian newspapers stated, the Russians work cleverly in Syria and are fully aware that Assad’s position has become fragile; Syria is politically and economically destroyed; the cost of its reconstruction is estimated at \$200 billion, and anti-Assad protests are still taking place in some Syrian cities. Apparently, the Russians are aware that establishing stability in Syria with the presence of Assad is difficult to achieve.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, they have resorted to signing long-term economic and investment agreements with the current Syrian regime, as a hedging maneuver before Assad steps down and to ensure lucrative revenues to compensate for the money Russia has spent since the start of the Syrian crisis.

Amid these obstacles, the Russians believe that Iran is not a country that would stabilize the Syrian economy or help with its development. It will contribute slightly to Syria’s reconstruction due to the sanctions imposed on its firms as well as its fragile economy. Iran entered Syria to impose its military, security, and doctrinal presence, it never aimed to develop Syria. Iran has not taken care of development projects at home; how will it help in rebuilding an Arab state? Thus, Russia is smoothing the path and announced at the United Nations that it will supervise Syria’s reconstruction, including donor coordination. Donors will not accept Iran’s participation in Syria’s reconstruction, especially the Arabian Gulf states, probably expect for Qatar.

## **IV. Competition Over Syria’s Geopolitical and Geocultural Position**

The most significant conflict between the Russians and the Iranians is geopolitical, which stems from Syria’s geographical location and historical stature. According to the Iranians, Syria is their closest gateway to Europe, a necessary corridor to import energy to Europe, which the Russians are

working to monopolize. Therefore, the Russians are hindering Iran's plan to build a land corridor connecting Tehran to the Mediterranean.

From a geopolitical perspective Moscow seeks to achieve an international consensus, particularly including the United States and Israel to ensure a position in a new world order which is currently being formed. Russia wants a multipolar world order that eliminates US unilateral dominance. Russia is also aware that its presence in Syria grants it a new value in the international strategic balance of power. Russia probably wants to join the United States peace talks between the Arabs and the Israelis. Therefore, Russia will continue building permanent bases in Tartus, and will definitely have spheres of influence on the Mediterranean coastline, which will change the balance of power and possibly the status quo in the Middle East.

From the new Russian strategic perspective, it is expected that after the Russians have entrenched their presence in Syria; the first corner in their strategic triangle, they will entrench their influence in the two other corners: Libya and Yemen —which will strengthen their permanence in warm waters, and will allow them to stay close to major players in the international conflict for influence.

The warm waters, in particular the Mediterranean, was a dream of Peter the Great, 1672-1725, Tsar of Russia who built the first Russian navy and the largest Russian fleet. Putin, who possesses a Tsarist mindset and a communist heart, is taking decisive steps to achieve Peter's dream. However, Russia adopts a pragmatic approach; it does not have any sectarian-ideology which it aims to impose, like its previous communist ideology. Further, it will not allow political Islam to be a dominant component in Syria's future; rather it prefers an absolutely secular political system.

On the other hand, Iran's geostrategic ambitions stem from a regional-security-defense approach combined with a sectarian-national approach. Syria, according to Iran's sphere of vital interests, is part of its defense lines; which starts from Iran, then Iraq which is the second defense line, and finally Syria which is Iran's third defense line. Thus, taking control of Syrian-Iraqi territories would allow Iran and its proxies such as Hamas, the Islamic Jihad Movement, and Hezbollah to be in direct confrontation against its rival; Israel. Its long-term strategic goal is the formation of the so-

called 'Shiite-Crescent' which stands as a geographical and cultural barrier splitting away Arabs in the Arabian Peninsula from their Arab brothers in the north. To achieve this end, Iran aims to isolate Saudi Arabia and prevent it from taking any role in the future of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Iran hopes by achieving its 'Shiite-Crescent' to demolish and replace the Arab-Sunni component with a Persian-Shiite one.

When analyzing Iran's strategic perspective, it becomes apparent that Iran aims to transform the Arab-Israeli conflict from a cause based on Arabism and Sunnism into an Iranian-Israeli conflict based on Persianism, Shiism and the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih. Iran aims through this step to reap geostrategic gains to be added to its record of achievements in the Axis of Resistance, which has been intensively embedded in its ideological rhetoric. Iran has been ideologically working to implement its new notion of conflict using the slogan of "liberating Masjid Al-Aqsa" to achieve its revolutionary dream; leading the Islamic nations. Therefore, Iran seeks to undermine Saudi Arabia's spiritual stature as the custodian and protector of the two holy mosques. If Iran succeeds internationally to implement this new notion of conflict, it will exploit this in its debates with the West and Israel, until they recognize Iran as a major regional player and recognize its Shiite sect as a component in the framework of intercultural dialogue. Iran hopes to achieve its vision through its traditional method: 'deconstruction and reconstruction.' It has torn apart the cultural and ethnic fabric of the Syrian state, as it did in Iraq, then it will gradually reconstruct the sectarian state in accordance with the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih.

Iran knows that its main challenge against its geopolitical ambitions is Russia not Syria. Iran is afraid that it will be excluded from Russia's endeavors— with America Turkey, and the Arab states — in drafting Syria's political settlement and future which will fit Russia's vision. As a result, all of Iran's achievements during the past years will be destroyed. Iran believes that it has given Russia a chance to advance its place among world powers. Iran has invited Russia to participate in the Syrian crisis; it exerted all efforts possible to help Russia succeed in its mission in Syria. Iran deployed militias and ground forces, and paid a tremendous amount of money to save the Assad regime; eventually, Russia reaped the greatest gains with little losses.<sup>40</sup> Iran is waiting for Russia to return the favor; and make Iran

an integral participant in Syria's current understandings and agreements.

From a geocultural perspective, stemming from the fact that education is the bedrock of identity; Iran has launched a soft war in Syria through taking over Syrian schools and undermining the Sunni doctrine. Iran has gone further; it purposely demolished schools and universities to reconstruct them in its own way — giving the lead to Alawite-Shiite Syrians who are tasked with spreading Shiism among students and propagating the ideology of Velayat-e Faqih.

Iran has concluded 11 cultural and educational agreements with Syria, the latest was in January 2020. Early in 2014, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad issued a decree to teach the Shiite doctrine alongside the Sunni doctrine at schools. Iran is also working to spread the Persian language to make it the second language of Syria. It opened a Persian language department at the University of Damascus, then in Homs and Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, Tartus, and other Syrian universities. In an attempt to dominate the mindset of the youth, Iran established the so-called Imam al-Mahdi Scouts in 2014 — which is operating under the Imam Mahdi Association in Sayyidah Zaynab in Syria. The Imam al-Mahdi Scouts mainly aims to brainwash Syrian children with Iranian cultural and religious concepts and revolutionary slogans. To expand the Shiite sect, Iran has increased the construction of hussainiyas. By the middle of 2019, the number of hussainiyas reached around 500 and there were 69 hawzas (religious seminaries). These religious centers are devoted to teaching the principles of Shiite jurisprudence.<sup>41</sup>

As discussed, the goals of Iran and Russia are divergent. Iran aims to incite chaos, tear apart the cultural and ethnic fabric of Syria to sew a new sectarian fabric for the country. Russia, totally in the opposite direction, aims to maintain the unity of Syrian territories and establish a stable Syrian state – loyal to Moscow. It does not seek to change Syrian identity as protecting Arab Syrian identity will generate significant revenues through strengthening its relations with other Arab countries. Therefore, Russia has recently realized that Iran's presence in Syria will always be an obstacle in its path. It has become a major source of tension and internal fragmentation, as well as a source of concern for regional and international

actors in the Syrian conflict. Iran's chaotic behavior in Damascus prevents Moscow from turning its military victory into a political achievement which is internationally accepted. Accordingly, the reconstruction of Syria, which cannot be achieved without a political settlement with the international community, will be postponed.

## **V. The Future of Rising Iran-Russia Tensions**

Amid the rising tensions between Russia and Iran and as the time of reaping gains from the Syrian crisis is approaching closer, there are two scenarios that are likely to occur:

The first scenario is based on the aforementioned analysis, it can be called "Iran's limited influence in Syria." The indications for this scenario are the previously discussed tensions, disagreements, and the clashes between Iranian-backed forces and Russian forces across Syria. This is in addition to Moscow's political understandings and military plans with Turkey, America and Israel, as well as its likely future coordination with Arab countries against Iran's presence. It is worth mentioning here that following the coronavirus pandemic, three Arab leaders contacted Bashar al-Assad to help him address the coronavirus crisis; such an Arab breakthrough happened for humanitarian reasons. Also, since the killing of the former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, the organizational and combat performance of Iranian forces in Syria has regressed. Soleimani was seen as the mastermind behind Iran's expansionist activities in the Middle East, its de facto foreign minister of Iran's military affairs abroad, and the one who was in charge of deploying Iranian-backed paramilitary forces to battlefields in Iraq and Syria.

Moreover, Russia's desire to oust Iran from taking part in the future of Syria has become apparent. Russia is concerned that Iran will duplicate its Iraqi experience in Syria, strengthen its influence, tighten its grip on Syria's political decision-making, and occupy some of Syria's territories through its militias. Russia aims to control Syrian political decision-making through threatening its opponents with its air force, tactically using its international weight, and its flexibility in forming alliances at a time where all the world's countries do not recognize the legitimacy of sectarian-foreign militias that

Iran has deployed in Syria. Thus, the indications support the possibility of this scenario emerging. The coming developments are expected to increase tensions between Iran and Russia and gradually undermine Iran's influence in Syria, in particular the expansion of Iranian militias. However, this does not mean Iran will not stay or participate partially in the Syrian crisis.

According to the second scenario, the current developments will lead to “wide-ranging Iranian influence in Syria” and Iran will remain a major actor in determining Syria's future. Syria is seen as the strategic link for Iran's geopolitical project in the region. The withdrawal from Syria is non-negotiable for Iranians. It is quite likely that Iran will use sectarianism, in particular the Shiite doctrine, as a bargaining chip to convince the ‘Shiite’ Alawite Assad regime of the necessity to protect the Iranian ‘Shiite’ political system — which is against the Sunni majority in Syria and its neighboring countries. Iran will continue to hinder Russia to prove that it [Iran] is the power that the Assad regime can trust. It has entrenched a strong Shiite-sectarian presence in Iraq; thus, it can strengthen the Shiite Alawites in Syria as it strengthened the Shiite presence in Iraq. It also aims to prove to the Assad regime that Iran and Hezbollah are the only powers to be relied on to protect Syria from Israel and Sunni opposition forces. These Iranian arguments would probably push the Assad regime to convince Russia to allow Iran to take part in the Russian-Turkish-Western understandings on Syria's future and reconstruction, and allow Tehran to have a more powerful presence in Syria.

This scenario is backed by the fact that Iran has been endeavoring diplomatically to convince American Democrats that it adheres to the US strategy of ‘creative chaos’ which former US President Barack Obama inherited from his predecessor former US President George W. Bush. Iran compares its current regional activities in inciting tensions led by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to the ‘creative chaos’ theory of the Arab Spring. Every now and then Iran sends signals through its diplomats that it is the only power that can engage in ‘creative chaos’ amongst the Arab Sunnis who are circling Israel — here, in regard to this particular point, the Israelis and Iranians are in the same boat. Thus, if the Democrats win the coming US elections – amid the harsh economic and social conditions in the United States – it is likely that the Iran-West negotiations will recommence,

which may lead to a new peace deal with Iran — if the West turns a blind eye to Iran's role in Syria's future. Since Iran adopts a pragmatic approach when it needs to achieve its mega interests, it will probably recognize Israel as a state and forge an agreement with Tel Aviv similar to that of Camp David in return for recognizing its role as a major actor in Syria. Or, at least, Iran would agree to conclude a covert agreement, promising that Tehran and its proxies will not pose any threat to Israel. However, the facts and indications supporting this scenario are not valid enough to confirm it. Yet, this scenario remains a hypothesis that might be confirmed or refuted by the rapid developments in Syria and in the international arena. Ultimately, it is linked to the extent of Russia's insistence to oust Iran from playing a major role in the future understandings and negotiations on Syria.

## Conclusion

In a nutshell, this study aimed to review and analyze the Russian efforts and endeavors to intensify pressure on Iran in order to curb the influence of its militias and military expansion across Syria. It can be concluded that since the Russian and Iranian intervention in Syria, Iran-Russia relations have been temporary and represented a form of coordination to achieve their mutual interests rather than a strong strategic alliance. Following the developments in the Syrian crisis, their mutual interests have become divergent and their strategic disagreements have deepened. The disagreement between their agendas has surfaced; their co-existence in one country has turned out to be quite difficult. According to the Russian agenda, conventional military power is a mere tool to achieve political gains which would eventually lead to peace, restore the Syrian state and all its institutions. Russia is mainly focusing on the future of Syria as a state more than it cares for the future of Bashar al-Assad; however, it would use him as a bargaining chip to achieve a particular goal. According to the Iranian agenda, the so-called 'mullah regime,' as it did in Yemen and Lebanon, aims to maintain the doctrinal war, seed chaos, create a fragile state, and form an ideological political system that follows the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih under the dominance of the Persian empire and within the so-called 'Shiite Crescent.' Iran cannot achieve this goal without keeping the Assad regime in power.

Furthermore, a series of doubts have been accumulating for a very long time between Russia and Iran which led to the shattering of the principle of mutual trust. Russia and Iran have not expressed future 'joint' plans or a comprehensive vision in regard to the Syrian crisis. Thus, their disagreements are expected to escalate in the upcoming months. Meanwhile, Russia will continue its endeavors to forge agreements with international powers to entrench its presence in Syria and impose a status quo that serves its own interests. Syria, according to Russia, has presented an opportunity to advance its place on the ladder of world powers. Moscow aims to restore its historic position as an integral pole in the new world order. The military victories Russia has achieved in the battlefields in Syria against opposition forces are not enough as long as a well-defined political 'road map' has not been designed that is recognized internationally and authorizes Russia to lead the transitional period of Syria — moving the country from war to peace — according to Russia's plans. Russia believes that to achieve this end it must undermine Iran's obstructive role and eliminate its influence over Syrian affairs in general.

Russia's attempts to curb Iran's wild ambitions in Syria have come at the climax of its mission in Syria, especially after the coronavirus crisis and the decline of oil prices. Thus, Russia is in a race against time to forge a political settlement to save the gains it has achieved so far and compensate its losses via its companies which will take part in Syria's reconstruction phase. Russia will also smooth the path for the Gulf countries and international actors to help it rescue Syria from its deplorable failure.

Upon the aforementioned review and analysis, we expect that Iran will face further international isolation and deeper disagreements and divergences with Russia — which has proved good at managing the Syrian crisis and choosing the actors it trusts to be part of designing Syria's future. Militarily, the pressure against Iran's presence in Syria will increase through targeting its militias — operating in battlefields without air cover — by Israeli air forces. Politically, further pressure will be imposed against Iran since it does not enjoy international recognition nor the legitimacy to maintain its militias in Syria. Economically, Iran will continue to suffer pressure amid US sanctions and rising public protests against spending enormous amounts of money on projects abroad that do not benefit the Iranian people. Will

Iran surrender to the pressures and challenges of the status quo and accept Russia making the final decision in regard to the Syrian crisis, and be satisfied with a few gains to save face? Or will Iran, after years of enormous sacrifice, decide to stay in Syria despite the looming dangers —even if it must “drink from a poisoned chalice” again?

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