

## ISSUE BRIEF

# Russia and Iran in Syria— a Random Partnership or an Enduring Alliance?

*An interim report*

JUNE 2019 AMBASSADOR MICHEL DUCLOS

Russia and Iran are allies in Syria not out of mutual sympathy, but for pragmatic reasons. According to many reports, Iranian leaders—notably including Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Al-Quds force of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC)—were instrumental in convincing Vladimir Putin to send his air force to Syria and save Bashar al-Assad’s skin in September 2015.<sup>1</sup>

However, various episodes highlight the limits of what looks like a circumstantial alliance. On February 26, 2019, Assad was received in Tehran by Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of the Islamic Revolution, in a setting evidently designed to showcase the Syrian dictator’s personal allegiance to the supreme leader and his debt of gratitude to the IRGC.<sup>2</sup> On the very same day, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was once again in Moscow, where he met with President Putin.<sup>3</sup> The asymmetric priorities in Tehran and Moscow could not seem clearer. A few months earlier, on May 9, 2018, Netanyahu attended the parade on Red Square, alongside Putin, on the anniversary of the end of World War Two (the “Great Patriotic War” in Russian parlance).<sup>4</sup> The follow-

1 Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, “Send Qassem Soleimani: Here’s how Putin and Iran Plotted Out Their New Assault in Syria,” Reuters, October 6, 2015, <https://www.businessinsider.fr/us/r-how-iranian-general-plotted-out-syrian-assault-in-moscow-2015-10>.

2 “Bashar Al Assad Visits Iran to Thank Ayatollah Ali Khamenei,” *National*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/bashar-al-assad-visits-iran-to-thank-ayatollah-ali-khamenei-1.830333>; Michel Duclos, “Letter from Tehran—Tense Climate in Iran,” Institut Montaigne, March 14, 2019, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/letter-tehran-tense-climate-iran>.

3 “Meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu,” President of Russia, April 4, 2019, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60221>.

4 Marc Bennetts, “Putin and Netanyahu Hold Talks as Tensions Flare over Syria Strikes,” *Guardian*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/09/russia-shows-off-new-missiles-and-jets-in-victory-day-parade-red-square>.

ing night, the Israeli armed forces launched a series of violent attacks against Iranian positions in Syria, in retaliation for an Iranian move to fire missiles into the Israel-occupied Golan Heights.<sup>5</sup> This exchange was part of a broader confrontation between Iranian and Israeli forces in Syria, with fairly regular attacks from Tshah and occasional attacks from the Iranian IRGC (supported by the Syrian air force and air defense) against Israel.

It is, therefore, appropriate to raise two very basic issues: how to disentangle the convergences of interest, and the potential divergences of views between the two major sponsors of the Assad regime. Is there a way for decision-makers in the West to exploit potential disagreements between Moscow and Tehran in order to help “contain” Iran in the Levant? The responses provided in this paper are based on a series of contacts with Russian and Iranian officials, as well as experts, in fall 2018 and early 2019, and more specifically during a visit in Tehran in March and a visit in Moscow in April 2019.<sup>6</sup> They are of a provisional nature, as the situation in Syria—contrary to the general perception of an endgame—appears far from settled. They tend to support the preliminary conclusion that Moscow is unlikely to antagonize Iran in Syria unless some kind of game changer pushes Putin to review his options.

## The Terms of the Equation

As a starting point, it may be relevant to quickly go through the potential points of disagreement between the two allies. In the short term, one can observe some degree of competition between the Iranians and the Russians in trying to get access to Syria’s rare economic resources; contracts on phosphates, other natural resources, and the exploitation of the Latakia harbor are fiercely disputed between Russian and Iranian businesspeople. On a more sensitive issue, it is also likely that Russia and Iran are engaged in a rivalry to put people close to them in key positions in the Syrian military and security forces, so as to secure a degree of influence in the decision-making process of the Assad regime. In this respect, it is often reported that Russia advocates a central role for a renovated

Syrian National Army, while Iran is keen to maintain an important part for IRGC-affiliated Shia militias in the regime’s security apparatus.

In the medium term, Russia and Iran—not forgetting Hezbollah, and in conjunction with a Syrian regime that is not an easy partner—still have to face strategic challenges on the ground, namely the crushing of the jihadi force in the Idlib province, the recovering of the Kurdish-controlled northeastern part of the country, and, eventually, the reconquest of the Turkish-controlled areas. Recent events suggest that the two allies do not agree on how to deal with those challenges. Finally, in the long run, there are reasons to think that Russia and Iran do not share the same vision of Syria’s future. Russia sees a secular Syria that is somewhat decentralized, and not necessarily territorially intact, while Iran sees something closer to the Lebanese model. There is no doubt that Russia and Iran have different ideas about the regional balance of which Syria should be a part; this goes back to the Israeli dimension discussed earlier.

The overarching impression that emerges from the interviews the author conducted with numerous Iranian and Russian colleagues is that one should not exaggerate the potential points of disagreement between Tehran and Moscow. These sources do not deny a range of frictions on the ground—the most spectacular case being Iranian and Russian proxies clashing near Aleppo—but they tend to downgrade the impact of these frictions on the joint management of the Syrian crisis at the strategic level. Regarding midterm challenges (Idlib, and the northeast and north of Syria), past experiences show that Russian and Iranian leaders have been able to overcome divergences related to similar situations. In a nutshell, there is a common view in Tehran and Moscow that the common interest of “holding Syria” transcends factors of competition, rivalry, or divergence—at least for the moment.

What about longer-term stakes? Two elements must be taken into consideration.

First, Russian decision-makers are hardly focused on a distant future in Syria; they set themselves limited ob-

5 Loveday Morris, Ruth Eglash, and Louisa Loveluck, “Israel Launches Massive Military Strike against Iranian Targets in Syria,” *Washington Post*, May 10, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/israel-says-retaliation-just-the-tip-of-the-iceberg-after-iran-blamed-for-overnight-strikes/2018/05/10/bd2fde18-53e8-11e8-a6d4-ca1d035642ce\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-says-retaliation-just-the-tip-of-the-iceberg-after-iran-blamed-for-overnight-strikes/2018/05/10/bd2fde18-53e8-11e8-a6d4-ca1d035642ce_story.html).

6 Interviews with author, March 3–8 and April 16–20, 2019. In both cases, interviews were conducted on the condition of anonymity.



Iranian President Hassan Rouhani shakes hands with Russian President Vladimir Putin during their meeting in the Black sea resort of Sochi, Russia February 14, 2019. *Sergei Chirikov/Pool via REUTERS*

jectives, such as keeping a naval facility in Tartus and an air base in Khmeimim. Of course, that implies that some stability prevails in the post-civil-war situation in Syria. These decision-makers also insist that they have limited leverage with the Syrian system. Rather than looking for a vast political settlement, which would entail both heavy lifting on their part and a risky reshuffle of the Syrian system (a real “transition”), they tend to favor cautious management of the *status quo*. They would be satisfied with incremental progress, such as the return of some refugees and the normalization of relations between the Syrian regime and some Arab and European countries. That way of thinking leads them to see the Iranians as necessary, if complicated, partners. It must be added that a mirror perception can be found in Tehran. Iranian leaders have no trust in Russia whatsoever, but believe that the Russians need Iran in Syria

more than the Iranians need Russia. One of the experts met in Tehran stressed that the Russian approach in the Middle East tends to value a capacity to cultivate good relations with all actors—to take, in practice, the role of the honest broker from the United States. It follows that a complete reversal of the Russian stance—aligning its policy completely with the interests of Israel, the United States, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia against Iranian interests—would be highly unlikely.

Outside of the Syrian context, Russia and Iran must rely on each other concerning issues—Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the Caucasus—that are highly sensitive for Moscow.

The second point related to long-term stakes in the Russian-Iranian relationship in Syria is that Moscow

has devised, for the time being, a set of answers to the most vexing issue—the uncertainties of the rather strange Iran-Russia-Israel triangle. The Russian strategy on this issue implicitly rests on two elements. On the military side, Putin has repeatedly told Netanyahu that Russia is not able to constrain Iranian activities in Syria. Putin does what he can—namely, letting Israeli forces have a free hand in operating against Iranian and Hezbollah positions, at least as long as no Russian citizens and no Syrian structures are hit. In that regard, the weak reaction from Moscow to Donald Trump's recognition of Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights is additional evidence of Russian benevolence toward Israeli security concerns.<sup>7</sup>

The final purpose of this *laissez faire* policy from Moscow regarding Israeli strikes in Syria is that Iranian leaders will one day realize themselves what is the “tolerable” level of Iranian presence in Syria from the Israeli point of view. An additional advantage, seen from Moscow, would be to make sure that Iran would not take too large a place in Syria or become too strong in influencing the Syrian regime. The fact is that, for the time being, the Iranian leadership rejects the idea of downsizing its transfers of military equipment to Hezbollah or the establishment of Iran's own military positions. Iran is still in the business of maintaining, or increasing, its transfers to other proxies in the area ( Hamas, for instance). Experts in Tehran tend to minimize the impact of Israeli operations against Iranian interests in Syria, insisting that they are more about gesticulation for domestic consumption than real actions with operational objectives. They do not deny that their country is engaged in more than setting up military bases. What is at stake, from their viewpoint, is an effort by Iran to develop economic and human ties with Syrian society, as well as instruments of lasting political influence.

On the political side, there is also a Russian answer to the uncertainties of the Iran-Russia-Israel triangle. Russian officials and experts say that rebuilding the Syrian national army is the best way to check Iranian influence, as it would make the Syrian regime less dependent upon Shia militias. They pretend that Assad himself—whom they present as a secular and nationalist leader—represents the best assurance against an excess of Iranian

meddling in Syrian affairs. More recently, Russian leadership has embarked on a campaign to convince leaders in various Arab capitals that re-establishing diplomatic relations with the Assad regime would be useful for challenging Iranian clout in Damascus.<sup>8</sup>

## Limits of the Russian Approach

For an outside observer, the two pillars—military and political—of the Russian approach present weaknesses. On the military front, the Russian gamble is that the dialectical relationship between Iranian expansion and Israeli strikes will resolve itself in a kind of self-regulation mechanism. One could say that, in the real life, the opposite is happening: the Iranians feel compelled to double down in their involvement in Syria, in order to avoid falling victim to some tacit Russia-Israeli arrangement. In that context, there is a growing risk of miscalculation, drift, or escalation in the Israeli-Iranian confrontation, the realization of which would undoubtedly harm Russia's position.

At the political level, the double gamble on the reconstruction of the Syrian army and on the perpetuation of Assad's rule also seems hazardous, as far as limiting Iranian influence is concerned. Interviews in Tehran indicate that the Iranians are aware of Russian intentions to instrumentalize the rebuilding of a national Syrian army. The Iranian leadership is also ready to contribute to refurbishing the Syrian armed forces, meaning it is ready to compete with Russians in that field, as well as to preserve its advantage in terms of leadership of the militias.

On those issues and others, the Iranians feel they can rely on Assad's goodwill to protect and advance their interests. This is one of the paradoxes of the current situation in Syria: neither Russia, Iran, nor Israel wishes for Assad's departure, as each of the three countries believes that keeping him is to its advantage. Some nuances should be kept in mind. Russia can basically keep its gains in Syria, whatever the future of Syrian leadership. Iran, as already noted, has an interest in diversifying its investments in Syria, and in building areas of influence in demographic, economic, and cultural terms. In the meantime, Iranian influence is directly

7 Natasha Turak, “Trump Officially Recognized Israel's Annexation of the Occupied Golan Heights. Here's What It Means,” CNBC, March 27, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/03/27/trump-officially-recognized-israels-annexation-of-golan-heights.html>.

8 Samuel Ramani, “UAE and Russia Find Common Ground on Syria,” Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, March 11, 2019, <https://agsiw.org/uae-and-russia-find-common-ground-on-syria/>.



Sergey Lavrov during their talks in the Black Sea resort city of Sochi,, Russia, May 14, 2019. *Pavel Golovkin/Pool via REUTERS*

linked to the Assad clan, as neither the vast Sunni majority nor the Alawites have sympathy for Iran. Without a Shia basis in Syria, as in Iraq and Lebanon, Iran must rely on Assad and his family as its major entry point into Syria.

In this respect, a French reading of Assad's biography may be relevant.<sup>9</sup> Hafez al-Assad had established balanced and mutually beneficial relations with Iran. As soon as he came to power in 2000, young Bashar gave Hezbollah an importance in Damascus politics that it did not enjoy under Hafez. Then a series of events—and Bashar al-Assad's personal choices in response to these circumstances—progressively tilted the balance

of the Syria-Iran relationship to the benefit of the latter, and increased Damascus' dependence upon Hezbollah and Iran. These included Syrian agencies' contributions to the insurrection in Iraq against the US presence there (starting in 2003), former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination (2005), the withdrawal of Syrian military forces from Lebanon (2006), attempts to obstruct the creation of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (2006-2011), and, of course, calls for Hezbollah and the IRGC to crack down on the uprising of the Syrian people (starting in 2011).

One may think that Assad became aware, around 2006-2007, that he was becoming too heavily en-

9 Michel Duclos, *La Longue Nuit Syrienne—Dix Ans De Diplomatie Francaise* (Paris : Editions De l'Observatoire, 2019).

tangled in an “axis of resistance,” with less and less room for him to maneuver. Incidents such as high-level Hezbollah official Imad Mughniyeh’s assassination in Damascus (February 12, 2008) were illustrative of a malaise that has affected the apparently smooth relations between the three partners.<sup>10</sup> Assad went along with the overtures for improved relations offered by Turkey and Qatar (2006–2007), and then by France (2008), probably in order to regain some autonomy from his Shia allies. It was moreso the case when he accepted establishing indirect contacts with Israel on the Golan Heights issue, with Turkey acting as a mediator (2008). However, Assad never quit his role as a good soldier of the “resistance axis”—for instance, during the Gaza war in early 2009. By 2010, when tensions again rose in Lebanon due to the anticipation of indictments by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, he roundly sided with Hezbollah and helped undermine Saad Hariri’s position as prime minister. One may only wonder if he was still able to make his decisions freely at the time.

In any case, after eight years of being entirely at the mercy of Hezbollah and Iranian saviors (as well as of his Russian sponsors), it would be logical for Assad to relaunch relations with the Arab states. However, Arab leaders should be under no illusions. The Syrian hereditary dictator may need to diversify his foreign contacts, in order to regain some weight inside the “resistance axis,” but he cannot envisage emancipating himself from his ties with Hezbollah and Iran. The Syria-Hezbollah-Iran trio will remain his ultimate horizon.

## What is to be Done?

Similarly, Western leaders should be under no illusion about the capacity and willingness of Russian leadership to seriously limit Iranian influence in Syria. President Putin certainly believes that by letting Israel do much of what it wants, he goes as far as he can in the direction of “containing Iran.” He does not plan to push the competition with Iran for influence in Damascus further, for two reasons already mentioned. First, Russia cannot do without Iran on the ground if it wants to maintain a military presence in Syria. Second,

with limited objectives and little leverage in Syria, the Russian leadership would not deem it appropriate to enter a potentially damaging showdown with its main ally. Furthermore, at least for the moment, Russian leaders do not consider as serious two major risks in their strategic partnership with Iran that are identified by some keen observers in Moscow: the risk of escalation in the confrontation between Israel and Iran; and the risk of a deep Iranian penetration of the Syrian social fabric, which, over the long term, may complicate Russian dealings with the power in Damascus.

Russian politics are pragmatic. It’s quite possible that what began as a random partnership between Moscow and Tehran turns out to be an enduring alliance. Russia’s elite are familiar with the French saying *“il n’y a que le provisoire qui dure.”*<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, future developments may bring fresh elements of disension into the alliance. In that case, Russia could review its options. Apart from the scenario of a high-level showdown between Israel and Iran, other “game changers” may occur, such as in the context of a serious crisis around Idlib or the northeast of Syria. In both instances, the Russian leadership has reasons to resist a call for action coming from either Damascus or Iran, with the clear support of the Russian military.<sup>12</sup> Other scenarios are possible, including those related to the enormous economic pressure the Syrian regime now has to endure, to a large extent due to US sanctions against Iran. Or, there are possible scenarios related to the larger picture in the Middle East. For instance, in addition to their “special relationship” with Israel, the Russians seem very interested in improving their strategic relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

If a real window of opportunity opened, paving the way for Moscow to take a tougher stance in its relations with Tehran, various actors—Arab, American, Israeli, and even European—would play a major role in providing Moscow with incentives to act. The instinctive reaction among those actors would be to suggest “benchmarks” or “red lines” to oppose Iranian behavior. Such an approach would, in fact, be an extrapolation of what Israel is already requesting (with partial suc-

10 Bill Roggio, “Hezbollah Terrorist Leader Imad Mugniyah Killed in Syria,” *Long War Journal*, February 13, 2008, [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/02/hezbollah\\_terrorist.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/02/hezbollah_terrorist.php).

11 “Only the provisional lasts.”

12 It must be said that, at the time of this writing, Russia and the Assad regime seem to have started a kind of “creeping escalation” in Idlib, which is perfectly compatible with Iranian expectations.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu holds a proclamation signed by U.S. President Donald Trump recognizing Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, during a weekly cabinet meeting in Jerusalem April 14, 2019. *REUTERS/Ronen Zvulun*

cess): no transfer of weapons to Hezbollah, no Iranian military base in Syria, no missiles manufactured, and so on. A key new element should be the withdrawal of all foreign and foreign-led militias from Syria—which would be consistent with current official discourses in Moscow and Tehran. In this case, would the United Nations Security Council adopt a resolution regarding a kind of code of conduct? Shouldn't the P3 (France, the United Kingdom, and the United States) start preparing to make an offer to Russia, in a spirit of contingency planning? In this regard, one of the difficulties will be for the P3 to differentiate between groups affiliated with Iran and groups affiliated with Turkey.

Finally, those tactical questions should not hide a more strategic issue. Even in the most optimistic scenario,

if this approach of enhanced benchmarks or red lines is followed, it would remain extremely difficult to constrain Iranian activities in an irreversible way. In the case of the south de-escalation zone, Iran committed itself to withdraw the Shia militiamen affiliated with the IRGC, but the same militiamen resurfaced a few days later in Syrian military uniforms. It was a clear warning about Iran's ability to circumscribe constraints imposed from outside. The only way to "contain" Iran in Syria would be to deprive the Iranians of their main tool of influence, the Assad family. Yes, toppling Assad may seem counterintuitive at a time when nobody questions the fact that he was the winner of the vicious civil war of the last eight years. As a matter of fact, his staying in power is essential to the continuation of Iranian influence in Syria. That is why Western powers should

re-establish dialogue with Russia about what used to be called the “fate of Assad.” At the same time, if Russia is to change its position on the “fate of Assad,” a pre-condition would be to convince Israeli leaders that Bashar al-Assad is not, or is not anymore, the “devil they know,” but a major pawn of a determined Iranian strategy, for the long haul, in the neighboring country.

A last remark: as with many issues, time is of the essence. The more Iranians are allowed to embed themselves in the fabric of Syrian society, especially in strategic areas close to Lebanon or to the Golan Heights, the less they will depend upon Assad’s system only—and the more difficult it will become to find a way to limit their influence in Syria, however the Russians feel about it.









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