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ASSESSMENT REPORT

The Widening Scope of Russian–Iranian Coordination: Egypt Aligned

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Jan 2015

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Introduction

On January 20, during the first visit by a Russian defence minister to Iran since 2002, Defence Minister Sergey Shoygu signed a memorandum of understanding with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Dehghan. The scope of the MoU between Iran and Russia covers a broad range of military and security affairs binding the two countries, including military training and joint maneuvers; cooperation on regional and global security; and the combat of what the agreement calls “terrorism, extremism and separatist tendencies”¹. Iranian-aligned media channels in the region were quick to call this deal the growth of a “strategic alliance” between Tehran and Moscow², and reported on the details of the military hardware allegedly included in the agreement, such as the hand-over of previously withheld S-300 missile batteries as well as the upgrading of MiG-29 and Sukhoi-24 aircrafts; the sale of spare parts and engines for these jets; and the provision of the more modern Sukhoi-30 fighter jets³. Kremlin-aligned media, equally playing up the significance of the visit, spoke of “shared interests” that tie Iran to Russia⁴.

Strategic Alliance, or a Transient Meeting of Interests?

The prominence attributed to Shoygu’s visit reflects the mission’s strategic endeavor, at a time when both countries face Western pressure—Iran in its ongoing negotiations with the West over its nuclear program, and Russia as a result of the Ukrainian crisis. Yet, calling the recently concluded agreement a strategic shift in relations between the two countries might be premature, Russian-Iranian relations having long been plagued by mutual suspicion and a lack of trust.

1 “Iran and Russia Sign Military and Defense Cooperation Deal,” Al-Jazeera Net, 20 January 2015, <http://bit.ly/1DcQUSD>

2 “Russia delivers S-300 defensive missile system to Iran,” Al Mayadeen Net, 20 January 2015, <http://bit.ly/1H3vgpL>

3 Amer Mohsen, “Missiles to Tehran?” *Al Akhbar* English, 22 January 2015, <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/224371>

4 “Russia and Iran sign defense deal, ‘may resolve’ S300 missile delivery issue”, <http://rt.com/news/224443-russia-iran-defense-deal/>

For decades, the Russians have managed to use Iran as a bargaining chip in their complex relationship with the West. Russia, has in fact sided with Western powers on all of the major UN Security Council resolutions related to Tehran's nuclear program, including UNSC Resolutions 1737 (2006), 1747 (2007), 1803 (2008) and 1929 (2010)⁵. Iranian-Russian relations have soured on numerous occasions. In 2010, Moscow refused to honor a sale of the S-300 defensive missile system, despite Iran's payment of the US\$ 800 million price tag, prompting Iran to resort to the Paris-based International Court of Arbitration for redress and seeking \$4 billion in damages from the Russians⁶. There was also Russia's longstanding decline to service Iran's fleet of submarines, which would have given it increased operational maneuverability in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. In addition, the way in which Russia dragged its heels over the construction and servicing of Iran's Bushehr nuclear facility—another pawn in Russian dealings with the West—is yet another side to a long history of disappointment that sustains a strong current of suspicion amongst a number of Iranian decision-makers who do not trust Moscow and who remain cautious about over-reliance on the Russians⁷.

For its part, Russia has had its own misgivings about Iranian policies, particularly when it came to Iranians possessing nuclear weapons, abundantly made clear at last year's Non-Proliferation Conference hosted by Moscow⁸. There is also the widespread belief amongst Russian officials that Iran will not think twice to abandon its new found loyalty to Russia as soon as expanded scope for cooperation with the West, particularly with the United States, becomes possible. In particular, it is unlikely Russia will forget the way it was kept in the dark over the secret negotiations between Iran and the United States, mediated and hosted by the Sultanate of Oman. Paving the way for the Geneva Interim Agreement on the Iranian Nuclear Program, these talks form part of a growing

5 View Security Council resolutions concerning Iran's nuclear program:
<http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1737/>

6 Hani Shadi, "Russia and Iran: Military Cooperation," *Assafir*, 23 January, 2015 (link in Arabic),
<http://assafir.com/Article/18/397531>

7 "Missiles to Tehran?," Amer Mohsen, *Al Akhbar English*, January 22, 2015

8 Vitaly Naumkin, "Russia's Middle East policy after the G-20 summit," *Al-Monitor*, 24 November 2014,
<http://bit.ly/1uwwkaK>

trend towards Iranian-American bi-lateral negotiations that sit outside the framework of the P5+1 talks, a trend which Russia is anxious about⁹. Russia must also be worried about Iran's ambitions to become a main supplier of energy to Europe, knowing fully well that energy supplies are a major incentive for the West to arrive at a resolution for the Iranian nuclear issue¹⁰.

Irrespective of previous standoffs and a legacy of mistrust, the fact that Russia has been the subject of Western punitive measures, explicitly mentioned in US President Obama's 2014 State of the Union Address¹¹, has paved the way for increased Iranian-Russian coordination at a time of strengthened mutual interests between the two countries in the Middle East. Ruslan Pukhov, Director of the Moscow-based Center for Strategic Analysis, best sums up the motives underlying the countries' broadening coordination: Shi'ite Iran stands alongside Russia in the fight against Sunni Islamist extremist groups in the Middle East; Iran and Russia are both adversely affected by falling oil prices; and while the situation in the Ukraine has created tensions for Russia in Europe, Iran faces tensions in the Middle East and both countries are subject to Western sanctions.¹²

New Arenas for Coordination

Throughout the Syrian crisis, Russia and Iran have openly coordinated their support for the Assad regime, each for their own aims. The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and its occupation of wide swathes of Iraq and Syria in the summer of 2014, led to the bolstering of mutual Iranian-Russian interests in the region, prompted by the mutual fear of the rise and expansion of extremist jihadist groups and the inherent threat to their own regional policies and national interests.

9 Laurence Norman, "Two-Track Negotiations Led to Iran Nuclear Deal," *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 November 2013, <http://on.wsj.com/1zRZok8>

10 "Iran offers Europe gas amid Russian energy embargo fears," *The Telegraph*, 4 May 2014, <http://bit.ly/1rSIBVd>

11 "Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address January 20, 2015," The White House, 20 January 2015, <http://1.usa.gov/1KZM14R>

12 Hani Shadi, "Russia and Iran: Military Cooperation," *Assafir*, 23 January, 2015 (link in Arabic), <http://assafir.com/Article/18/397531> "Russia and Iran: Military Cooperation"

Lately, a new arena for cooperation has emerged between the Russians and the Iranians in Yemen, where the Iranian-aligned Houthi militia is locked in a battle with the state. As with its standing on the Syrian crisis, Moscow views the developing civil war in Yemen as an opportunity to regain a foothold in a region it had once been influential in. During the Cold War, it was the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) that had afforded the Soviets a chance to project their power on the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula.

The desire to pressure and threaten Saudi Arabia, however, is primarily what is fueling the emergent Russian-Iranian collaboration in Yemen. The Russians make no secret of their disgruntlement with Saudi Arabia for its refusal to reduce oil output to combat falling oil prices during the last meeting of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), held in November of 2014. Russian President Vladimir Putin has openly stated the belief that his country is being targeted as part of a price war which is being waged against it by the Saudis alongside the United States, with the aim of securing Russian concessions on a number of Middle Eastern issues¹³. These were claims echoed by Iran's President Hassan Rouhani, who openly threatened the countries which were leading the drive to reduce world oil prices, claiming they would "pay the price"¹⁴.

Overall, Moscow regards the Houthis' capture of Yemen's capital Sanaa, and their growing influence across the country to be beneficial to its long-term interests in the Arabian Peninsula. In Russia's view, the Houthis form part of a wider Shi'ite Axis with which it finds itself in a tacit alliance against Sunni powers in the Arab world (including both state actors and non-state actors) that it regards as a strategic threat to its interests¹⁵. This view is bolstered by the fact that the Houthi militia is the main foe of Al Qaeda in Yemen, earning it the chance to be a beneficiary of Russian weapons—

¹³ Stakes are high as US plays the oil card against Iran and Russia," *The Guardian*, 9 November 2014, <http://bit.ly/1ypgils>, and, "Why are global oil prices dropping? Vladimir Putin has a theory," *The Washington Post*, 6 November 2014, <http://wapo.st/1z4wHNY>

¹⁴ "Iran Leader Says US Not Only Target Of Suspected Saudi Oil Price War," Oilprice.com, 14 December 2014, <http://bit.ly/1y1YThF>

¹⁵ Daniel Mattera, "Geopolitical Implications of the Al-Houthi Emergence as a National Player in Yemen," 2 November 2014, <http://bit.ly/18niD9A>

including anti-aircraft Sam-1 and Sam-2 missiles¹⁶—shipped to it via Iranian vessels¹⁷. Russia's plans in Yemen are further evidenced in its behavior at the UN Security Council, where it continues to try and foil the efforts of UN Special Adviser on Yemen Jamal Benomar, who is working towards a return to the peace and cooperation settlement agreed upon on the eve of the Houthi capture of Sanaa in September of 2014, and which has yet to be implemented.

Meanwhile, accompanying the increased Russian support for Iranian interests in Yemen, is Egypt's baffling approach to the Syrian crisis. While Cairo's approach to Syria is primarily rooted in its domestic political agenda, and an obsessive fear of Islamist political movements, its current efforts are actually serving the aims of both Russia and Iran. Despite the fact that Iran and Russia's support of the Houthis' advance in Yemen could pose a threat to shipping lanes going through the Suez Canal (via the Bab al Mendeb Strait in the Red Sea), and thus to Egyptian national security as a whole, the Egyptian leadership finds itself working towards Russian-Iranian aspirations through its recent effort to mold a new Syrian opposition to act as a counterweight to the Syrian National Coalition. An alternative opposition movement is expected to be more pliant, and amenable to a negotiated settlement that would preserve the regime of the incumbent president Bashar al Assad, a clear departure from the principles enshrined in the Geneva Communiqué I, which calls for the establishment of a transitional authority with complete executive powers, and that would lead Syria to the establishment of a democratic system of rule¹⁸. In this respect, Cairo's position on Syria aligns itself with that of Moscow and Tehran, who seek to formulate an alternative system of government that would bring together the opposition and the present regime in a coalition primarily aimed at combatting Islamist groups, as part of the "war on terrorism"¹⁹.

¹⁶ "Yemen confirms capture of Iran ship carrying Russian-made missiles," *World Tribune*, 4 February 2013, <http://bit.ly/1yXs1Lo>

¹⁷ "With Arms for Yemen Rebels, Iran Seeks Wider Mideast Role," *The New York Times*, 15 March 2012, <http://nyti.ms/1zn0IMc>

¹⁸ "Egypt 'pushing for deal to end war in Syria'," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 22 January 2015, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/8b034fd5-2996-49e4-a284-245ad78d0d10>

¹⁹ Rayan Mohammed and Alexander Ayoub, "The Cairo Meeting: A Syrian Conference with Egyptian Characteristics," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 22 January 2015 (link in Arabic), <http://bit.ly/1yKDUDV>

Conclusion

As a result of Iran's scramble for regional hegemony, the Arab region's current state of flux threatens to descend into chaos. Russian support for Iran is informed by the emergence of transient mutual interests, represented by Moscow's exaggerated fears surrounding the growth of Sunni Islamist groups, and its bias toward regimes that uphold its own authoritarian, anti-revolutionary streak. Meanwhile, Arab powers such as Egypt remain primarily preoccupied with the preservation of their regimes at the cost of protecting wider Arab interests, to which Iranian ascendancy continues to be a chief threat.