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CASE ANALYSIS

Russia and Iran in Syria: Alliance or Competition?

Rod Thornton | Nov 2015

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Introduction

Russia's military intervention in Syria is significant for a number of reasons, both local and international.² Given the delicate balance evident in the conflict, Russian air power is an enormous boon to the beleaguered forces of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. It also helps another actor in the Syria war: the particular dynamics of the current conflict mean that a militarily involved Russia must – *de facto* – be in an alliance with Iran, another state whose forces are actively supporting Assad. Tehran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps 'Quds Force' has been very active in stiffening resistance to the regime's forces. Russian aircraft will undoubtedly provide air cover for Quds Force personnel, and will be striking targets designated by these Revolutionary Guards.

Russia and Iran appear to have created close ties around the current crisis. As Iranian Justice Minister Mostafa Purmohammadi put it recently, "Tehran-Moscow relations are rapidly developing and convergences between Iran and Russia on Syria can change the fate of the region."³ Such a 'convergence,' however, does not mean that Moscow and Tehran's interests in the Syrian imbroglio are in perfect alignment. While they both want Assad to survive as Syria's leader, beyond this shared goal any number of differences between the states may appear. This raises the questions: to what degree is the relationship between Russia and Iran actually one of alliance, and to what degree is it one of competition?

² This intervention consists of some 50 aircraft and 4,000 (non-combat) personnel. Neil MacFarquhar, "Confirmation of attack on Russian jet may strengthen Putin's resolve in Syria," *New York Times*, November 8, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/09/world/europe/confirmation-of-attack-on-russian-jet-may-strengthen-putins-resolve-in-syria.html?_r=0

³ "Minister: Iran, Russia can change region's future," *Islamic Republic News Agency* website, November 5, 2015, <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/81827055/>.

Russia's Motives

For its part, Russia's interests in Syria appear purely political. President Vladimir Putin does not want to be perceived as taking sides in what many see as a Sunni-Shia dispute. Russia, as the Carnegie Moscow Center's Dimitri Trenin explains, "feels uncomfortable with this alliance with Shiite power."⁴ To those in the Kremlin, Assad is merely a secular leader they wish to assist for two simple reasons. First, because Moscow wants to be seen as supportive of their long-term ally, but also because the support raises Russia's profile internationally as a great power. This second motive remedies Russia's longtime sidelining by western powers. The Kremlin has long felt that Russia has not been shown appropriate respect by powers on the world stage. While the argument has been made that Russian aircrafts entered Syria solely to prevent ISIL terrorism from reaching the homeland, this rationale does not hold much water: Moscow's actions are in fact more likely to increase terrorism in Russia than to prevent it.⁵ Moreover, Russian air sorties seem to have been directed more at moderate anti-Assad groups than at ISIL targets. It is clear from Russia's actions, that Moscow's aim has been to help the regime defend vital areas under immediate threat from non-ISIL forces (i.e. in Homs and Hama provinces) and to recapture Aleppo where, again, ISIL has little influence.⁶

⁴ MacFarquhar, "Confirmation of attack."

⁵ Nicholas Noe, "Strange bedfellows in Syria," *Foreign Affairs*, October 3, 2015 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2015-10-03/strange-bedfellows-syria>.

⁶ J Matthew McInnes, "Thanks to Russia Iran could lose control of the Syrian war," *The National Interest*, October 13, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/thanks-russia-iran-could-lose-control-the-syrian-war-14061>.

Iranian Motives

Iran, on the other hand, is perceived to support Assad mostly because of his and his Alawite sect's connections to Shia Islam. Before Russia's intervention, Iran had more or less free hand in Syria, dictating the course of events. While Iranian forces aimed to support Assad, they were not able to sway the battle in his favor. The Quds Forces were coming under so much pressure that Tehran had to call in Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon to shore up the regime's defenses. Even this, though, did not prove effective. Indications are that Tehran actually invited Russia to intervene in Syria in order to save Assad from defeat, and to save Iran from considerable embarrassment.⁷ Now, with the Russian presence, Iranian troops on the ground are not only able to push back anti-Assad forces, but Iran itself is put in a much stronger strategic position vis-à-vis its regional rivals in the Syrian conflict - Saudi Arabia and Turkey. In order to avoid any clash with Russian air power, Riyadh and Ankara will both now be very wary of interfering too much in Syria to counter Iran's influence.⁸

Alliance or Competition?

Given their different reasons for supporting Assad, and the disconnect between the motives behind Russia and Iran's involvement in Syria there are bound to be disagreements between the two - both now and in the future - over what advice should be given to Assad and what tactics - or indeed, strategy - should be adopted in the conflict. Tensions in the 'alliance' are bound to be created.

⁷ Nader Habibi and Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee, "Russian cooperation with Iran and Iraq has broader consequences than saving Assad," *The Conversation*, October 16, 2015, <https://theconversation.com/russian-cooperation-with-iran-and-iraq-has-broader-consequences-than-saving-assad-49164>.

⁸ Ibid.

While the initial targeting of factions that oppose the Assad regime will be based on the immediacy of the threat they pose, once immediate threats have been dealt with eyes will inevitably turn to the offence. Since the Quds Forces have been picking Russian targets, targeting priorities may become a point of contention as a choice presents itself: Moscow might prefer to take on a certain group or clear a certain area first, while Tehran might have different target sets in mind. It is clear, however, that the more effective Russian air power proves the greater the say Moscow will have in the future course of events in Syria. This may be to the detriment of Iranian interests.

Any tensions developed between Russia and Iran in Syria, however, will be ameliorated to some extent given the close relationship that Russia and Iran have developed over the last few years. Moscow has long been a supporter of Tehran if for no other reason than both having had a mutual distrust of the western powers' activities in the region, the United States in particular.⁹ Cross-border trade between these neighboring countries is another evident reason for cooperation.¹⁰ The Russians have moreover been providing the Iranians with nuclear power plants for years, with new orders still sought.¹¹ Arms transfers to Iran are another lucrative source of trade for Russia and of strategic benefit to Iran. Tehran has specifically been pressing for the supply of S-300 anti-aircraft defense systems and their delivery is drawing closer as western sanctions

⁹ Nikolay Kozhanov, "Understanding the revitalization of Russian-Iranian relations," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, May 5, 2015, <http://carnegie.ru/2015/05/05/understanding-revitalization-of-russian-iranian-relations/i8bl>.

¹⁰ Mark Katz, "Elusive as ever: The state of Iranian-Russian cooperation," *Wilson Center Viewpoints*, 73, March 2015, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/elusive_as_ever_state_of_iranian_russian_cooperation.pdf.

¹¹ David Herszenhorn, "Russia quickly maneuvers to capitalize on Iran nuclear deal," *New York Times*, July 14, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/15/world/europe/russia-quickly-maneuvers-to-capitalize-on-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

on Iran come to an end. Other arms deals and cooperation agreements are also being considered.¹²

The ties established between the two countries have grown to the point now where head of the Quds Force Major-General Qassem Soleimani traveled to Moscow in August 2015 to meet with Putin himself.¹³ That a mere military commander could meet with the Russian President shows the depth of contact that must exist between Iran and Russia.

Such signs of cooperation, however, must be balanced by the fact that Russia and Iran are, and will continue to be, in competition over the selling of oil and gas to Europe. The lifting of sanctions on Iran will only exacerbate this particular point of difference as Iran tries to undercut Russian prices.¹⁴ As one source puts it, "Russia [...] has the most to lose when Iran returns to the global energy market."¹⁵

Another point of difference looms if Russia uses its activities in Syria as an *entrée* to influence the government of Haider al-Abadi in Iraq. Within the Kremlin, it might seem a natural progression to help Abadi with the same problem that exists in Syria: the threat from ISIL. Indeed, Russia "has long sought to restore its strategic and military relationship with Iraq." Nothing, it may be assumed, would give Putin more pleasure than to replace the United States as the great power with the most leverage in

¹² "Russia, Iran plan to expand military cooperation," *REF/RL*, August 17, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-iran-lavrov-zarif-meeting/27192710.html>.

¹³ "Iran Quds chief visited Moscow despite UN travel ban," *Reuters*, August 7, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/07/us-russia-iran-soleimani-idUSKCN0QC1KM20150807>.

¹⁴ Angelina Rascoet and Javier Blas. "Russia seen as biggest oil-market loser when Iran comes back," July 6, 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-07-05/russia-seen-as-biggest-oil-market-loser-when-iran-comes-back>.

¹⁵ Elena Holodny, "Iran will be competing 'head on' with Russia," *Business Insider*, <http://www.businessinsider.com/iran-and-russia-competing-over-crude-oil-in-europe-2015-7>.

Baghdad. This is particularly so after Washington expended so much blood and treasure in Iraq over the last few decades. If Moscow does increase its degree of influence in Iraq, then, applying zero-sum logic, the influence of Tehran would doubtless diminish.¹⁶

Conclusion

Russia's intervention in Syria has significantly altered the balance of power, not just in Syria but also across the wider Middle East. Both Iran's position on the ground in Syria and its position vis-à-vis regional rivals have been significantly enhanced by the display of Russian air power. Over the short-term, this tie-up between Moscow and Tehran appears to be of mutual interest to both parties. In the long-term, however, the relationship has the capacity to move from one of alliance to one of competition. Both will want to shape the course of events to their own liking in Damascus and, eventually, Baghdad as well. In doing so, their interests will inevitably clash.

¹⁶ Habibi and Al-Qarawee, "Russian cooperation with Iran and Iraq has broader consequences than saving Assad."

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