

THE IMPACT OF THE UKRAINE WAR ON IRAN-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN SYRIA



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Abstract: Russia's need to focus on the war in Ukraine is likely to lead to a period of closer military coordination, if not cooperation, between Iran and Russia in Syria. In a long-term perspective, it is not likely that Russia will give up its core strategic interests in Syria, especially its military presence in the Mediterranean, in Iran's favor. In the short term, however, the potential reaction of other actors, especially Israel, to Iran's growing role, could lead to increased tensions in Syria and threaten the interests of Tehran and Moscow alike. The revival of ISIS or a reinvigorated insurgency against Assad could also bring about a similar outcome.

Introduction

Three months into the war in Ukraine, it has already become clear that the longer-term consequences of the Russian invasion will not remain confined to Eastern Europe or even the broader arena of Russia-West relations. On the one hand, the re-emerged Russia-West dichotomy is pushing the international system towards a new bipolarity. On the other hand, Russia's apparent miscalculation in Ukraine has cost Moscow a great deal of military and diplomatic capital, forcing the Russian leadership to re-assess their foreign policy priorities.

Syria is one of the theaters where this strategic re-assessment has been on display. Shortly after the start of the Ukraine invasion, as the Russians began to realize that their military plans were not proceeding as expected, reports started to emerge that Russia was reconsidering its military role in Syria. As Russia evacuated some of its positions in eastern and central Syria, Iranian and Iran-backed forces have increasingly taken over these positions, expanding Iran's territorial reach across the Arab country.¹ At the same time, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's visit to Tehran in May 2022 sparked speculations that Iran might be trying to take advantage of Russia's focus on Ukraine to expand its political role in Syria as well.²

As such, it seems that the new equations emerging in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine could help Iran strengthen its political and military influence in Syria. However, this will not necessarily result in heightened competition between Tehran and Moscow. On the contrary, Russia's need to focus on Ukraine is likely to lead to a period of closer military coordination, if not cooperation, between Iran and Russia in Syria. However, over the long term, Russia will not likely cede its core strategic interests in Syria in Iran's favor, especially its military presence in the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, Iran's growing role could result in the potential reaction of other actors, especially Israel. These increased tensions in Syria would threaten the interests of Tehran and Moscow alike. The revival of ISIS or a reinvigorated insurgency against Assad could also bring about a similar outcome.

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Iran and Russia in Syria: An uneasy partnership

To better understand how the Ukraine crisis could affect Iran-Russia relations in Syria, we need to first revisit how the two countries decided to forge a partnership to support the Assad regime and how their relationship in the Syrian context has evolved ever since. The Iranian and Russian military interventions in Syria were triggered at different times and for fundamentally different reasons. The Islamic Republic began its military intervention in the very first months of the Syrian uprising in 2011 – first indirectly through military advisors and then more directly. By deploying units of its elite Quds Force and, at the same time, organizing local militias under the banner of the “National Defense Forces,” the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) played an essential role in preventing Assad’s fall in the critical early phase of the Syrian uprising. At the same time, Iranian leaders viewed the Syrian crisis as a “plot” by Western powers and their regional allies against Damascus.³ In contrast, although the Russian military presence in Syria, especially on the Syrian shores of the Mediterranean, dates back to the Soviet era, it was only in September 2015, more than four years after the start of the Syrian conflict, that Russia finally decided to launch a military campaign in support of Assad. Prior to that, Moscow mainly provided political and diplomatic support for Damascus, especially at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). At the same time, unlike Iran, the Russians did not shy away from talking or even cooperating with the West on Syria. The Russian-American agreement on Syria’s chemical disarmament, which entered into force in September 2013, clearly reflected this approach.⁴

In terms of objectives, Iran’s intervention in the Syrian crisis and its comprehensive support for Assad has been driven by two sets of geopolitical and ideological considerations.⁵ Geopolitically, as a crucial ally for Iran in the Arab world, Syria has always been of great strategic value to the Islamic Republic. Also, since the fall of the Saddam regime in Iraq in 2003, Syria has served as a geopolitical bridge that allows Iran to project its power all the way westward to Lebanon and the Mediterranean. A regime change in Syria would not only deprive Iran of this unique geopolitical advantage, but it could also provide a boost to Iran’s regional rivals, especially Turkey and Saudi Arabia, thereby effectively isolating Tehran in the region. As for the ideological factor, the Islamic Republic considers Syria a member of the so-called “axis of resistance,” which also includes the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, and a number of non-state armed groups in Iraq and Palestine.

GEOPOLITICALLY, AS A CRUCIAL ALLY FOR IRAN IN THE ARAB WORLD, SYRIA HAS ALWAYS BEEN OF GREAT STRATEGIC VALUE TO THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

What unites the members of this axis is a fundamentalist reading of political Islam and an uncompromising opposition to Israel and the United States. That is why Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei said in January 2012 that the Syrian conflict was essentially a "conflict between the axis of resistance and its enemies in the region and the world," adding that "Iran will in no way tolerate the break-up of the axis of resistance, of which Syria is a part."⁶

In contrast, Russia's policy toward the Syrian conflict has been influenced by military, security, political, and economic considerations. It would be safe to argue that what convinced Russian leaders to elevate their support for Assad to the military level was to maintain – and even expand – their military presence in the Mediterranean. In mid-2015, when the Syrian rebels appeared determined to march toward western Syria, Russia began to worry about the fate of its naval facilities in Tartus.⁷ After the start of their military intervention, the Russians showed their desire to establish military control over all the Syrian coast of the Mediterranean by developing an air base at Hmeimim, near Latakia. From a security point of view, the emergence of radical armed groups, mainly ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, was seen as a threat, especially as those groups had managed to attract a significant number of militants from Russia and other former Soviet republics.⁸ At the political and diplomatic level, Russia primarily sought to restore its position as a global power on par with the United States, capable of projecting power to remote regions of the globe. This was especially important for Moscow as relations with the West had already deteriorated over Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Finally, economic considerations were also at play, both in terms of maintaining Syria as a major customer of Russian military hardware and maintaining and expanding Russia's role in Syria's energy sector.⁹

As such, from the very beginning, Iran and Russia entered the Syrian conflict with different goals and perspectives. The main factor that connected Tehran and Moscow was their mutual interest in helping Assad maintain his grip on power. In other words, preserving the Assad regime has been a precondition for both Moscow and Tehran to secure their interests in Syria. Therefore, it came as little surprise that after attaining its primary objectives, i.e., maintaining its military presence in the Mediterranean, defeating ISIS, and successfully proving its role as an indispensable external power in the Middle East, Russia

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began to limit Iran's influence in Syria.¹⁰ In contrast, Iran's ultimate success in maintaining its aims in Syria, especially in terms of keeping Damascus in the axis of resistance, would require Tehran to be the dominant actor on the Syrian military and political stage. In this manner, one might argue that as far as Russia is concerned, the war in Syria has already ended, and the focus should be on stabilization and reconciliation – indeed on Russia's terms. But for Iran, the war is still ongoing, albeit in a different form and at a different level.

The impacts of the war in Ukraine

Russia's failure to achieve its strategic objectives in Ukraine as quickly as expected and the unprecedented confrontation between Moscow and the West in the aftermath of the Russian invasion could affect some of the elements that have shaped how Russian leaders perceive victory in Syria. Since 2015, Russia has increasingly used its influence in Syria as a tool for diplomatic maneuvering in the Middle East and beyond. In line with their desire to restore Russia's role as an effective great power, Russian leaders largely succeeded in projecting the image that security and stability in Syria – and by extension, the Middle East – would not be possible without Moscow's positive contribution. Initiatives such as the New Security Architecture for the Persian Gulf, put forward by Moscow in recent years, should be interpreted in this context.¹¹ However, the post-Ukraine War international atmosphere, and especially the West's determination to isolate Russia, makes any effective and meaningful cooperation between Russia and the West in the Middle East all but impossible. Moreover, Russia's failures in Ukraine have severely damaged its international credibility as a major power.

Under these circumstances, if the situation in Syria, which has so far been considered the main symbol of the post-Soviet restoration of Russian military power, also shifts to Moscow's detriment, the consequences for Russia's international image will be beyond repair. Here, Russian leaders face a dilemma. On the one hand, in order to achieve at least a minimum of their strategic goals in Ukraine, they have to allocate the maximum possible amount of Russia's military resources to the war in Ukraine. On the other hand, any significant troop withdrawal from Syria could jeopardize all of Russia's achievements

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there over the past seven years. What further complicates matters is that other external and internal actors involved in the Syrian conflict are already seeking to exploit Russia's obsession with Ukraine to their benefit. After Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan revealed his plans to repatriate one million Syrian refugees, a new Turkish operation in northern Syria appears to be on the horizon.¹² This could upend the status quo in northern Syria, and consequently, the overall balance of power in the country, to Russia's detriment. At the same time, terrorist and radical armed groups, particularly ISIS, are apparently trying to seize the opportunity to regroup and resume their activities.¹³ Similarly, if the Syrian opposition forces manage to form a new alignment and resume armed insurgency, tough times will be ahead for the Assad regime and its allies.

Recent reports about Russian troops withdrawing from some of their positions in Syria and handing them over to the Iranian and Iran-backed forces make sense in relation to this dilemma. Since the start of the Ukraine crisis, Iran has reactivated its forces in vast areas of Homs and Deir ez-Zor provinces while equipping its proxy forces in various parts of Syria with new high-quality weapons. Iranian and Iran-backed forces have also expanded their presence in al-Hasakah. What is certain so far is that Russia has been reconsidering its Syria strategy.¹⁴ That said, speculations about Russia's "withdrawal" from Syria must still be taken with a grain of salt. In response to such assumptions, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that Russian forces would remain in Syria, although their mission would be primarily "advisory" – a reference to the fact that Russia still sees its military objectives as being met.¹⁵

As such, it seems that Russia is rolling back the policy of expanding military influence in Syria to once again focus on its fundamental interests in the country. From this perspective, the withdrawal of Russian forces from their position in central Syria is apparently aimed at concentrating them at the main Russian bases in the west. At a time when Russia's military leadership is essentially preoccupied with the war in Ukraine, overstressing Russian forces throughout Syria would have exposed them to attacks by local militias. One can argue, therefore, that the recent developments on the ground point to a new division of labor between Tehran and Moscow, according to which the Iranian forces are in charge

of confronting the revival of radical armed groups and maintaining pro-Assad positions in eastern and central Syria. However, a similar trend cannot be expected in the west, where Russia's vital interests, i.e., its Mediterranean bases, are located. Besides, there have been no reports thus far of the Russian air force being redeployed from Syria to Ukraine. Since Russia's main military contribution to the war in Syria has been to provide air cover for the Syrian army and pro-Assad militias, Moscow will maintain the ability to support the Assad regime should the situation deteriorate. In the meantime, Iran and its allied forces will play a more significant role on the ground. Indeed, this could give Iran a free hand to expand its geographical reach, while helping Russia ensure that its primary interests in Syria are not jeopardized.

This apparent coordination at the military level is less the case in the political and economic spheres. In fact, Iranian leaders have already sought to take advantage of Assad's concerns about Russia's changing role and increase their political leeway in Syria. On February 27, Assad's special security adviser, Ali Mamlouk, traveled to Tehran to meet with senior Iranian officials. One month later, on March 28, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian visited Syria. Those diplomatic exchanges were a prelude to Assad's visit to Tehran on May 8, during which he met with Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi. Assad's visit to Tehran – only the second time since the start of the Syrian conflict – was an initiative by Tehran to reassure the Syrian president that, regardless of Russia's role, he can still count on Iran's full support.¹⁶ Iran tries to take advantage of the circumstances in the economic sphere as well. Iranian leaders hope that Russia's economic woes as a result of Western sanctions on the one hand, and the prospect of lifting the Iran sanctions with the potential revival of the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA) on the other, might give Tehran greater room for maneuver in Syria's post-war economic reconstruction where it has been increasingly marginalized by the Russians over the past four years.

Conclusion

The war in Ukraine has already started to affect the role of Russia and Iran in Syria and their interactions in the context of the Syrian conflict. In the short term, Russia's need to focus on the war in Ukraine will make Moscow reluctant to take on any new military adventures in Syria. It will also increase coordination on the ground between Iranian and Russian forces. In the meantime, Russia will maintain its air force preparedness to face potential threats while maintaining its bases in the Mediterranean. In the long run, Iran is expected to increase its economic and political influence in Syria.

Meanwhile, there is an important factor that makes the new status quo quite fragile. As Russia focuses on securing its basic interests, Iran sees the conditions as conducive to pursuing a maximalist strategy. Iranian leaders might be convinced that after a decade of active involvement in Syria, now is the time to achieve the ideological goals of their intervention, which is to solidify the “axis of resistance.” At least since 2018, Israel has been relying on Russia to keep Iran away from its borders with Syria. But various reports over the past few months indicate that in addition to central and eastern Syria, Iran has also been increasing its presence in southern Syria, close to the Israeli border.¹⁷ While Israel was already carrying out semi-regular air strikes against the positions of Iranian forces and Iran-backed militias in Syria, the expansion in Iranian influence has already led the Israelis to expand the frequency and scope of their attacks against Iranian positions. If at some point, Iran decides to show a direct military response to Israel, Syria may well become a battleground between Tehran and Tel Aviv. Such a scenario would be in stark contrast to Moscow’s desire to maintain calm in Syria in order to safely pursue its plans in Ukraine.

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