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Institute for Islamic Strategic Affairs

[RUSSIA & IRAN, SHARED INTERESTS IN SYRIA?]



Russia & Iran; Shared interests in Syria?

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Were the conflict in Syria part of a proxy war at the height of the Cold War, all other things being equal, it would arguably be interpreted as a Soviet victory over the West, due in part to the latter's reluctant acceptance that the Russian-supported, albeit beleaguered Syrian president Bashar al-Assad will in fact remain in power – or at least for the time being.

After all, war as defined by Clausewitz is “an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will”¹ a political tool, merely a continuation of policy by other means². With this understanding it becomes quite apparent that the West having been compelled to accept Russia's (and by extension Iran's) ally remaining in power, represents a political and strategic victory in the purest sense.

Indeed both Russia and Iran have been described as having declared victory over the West on Syria³ following the UN General Assembly in New York.

Although the West's alignment on the transitory status quo should not have come as a surprise, with the British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond hinting earlier in the month, that the UK could accept Assad remaining in power⁴. The outcome nonetheless illustrates how the West had miscalculated the steadfastness of the Russian position on Syria, with many hoping that Russia would abandon support of the Assad regime, especially following high profile interactions in recent months with Saudi Arabia, Jordan and other pro-Western Arab states including Egypt and Oman. If anything, Russia had gradually increased both its military supplies and presence in Syria. The West only being able to match this gesture with more coalition members entering the conflict with airstrikes and drone attacks (namely France, Australia and the UK) and recently dropping some ammunition to anti IS groups. At the time of writing, Russia too has commenced airstrikes of its own – although not without controversy, with accusations of targets

belonging to Western-backed rebels and not just those of IS.

A Russian U-turn would have left Iran as the sole international backer of the Syrian government, yet at the General Assembly, both leaders, Putin and Rouhani used the opportunity to convey the rationale for their support, with an apparent focus against IS taking over the Damascus. A fear which is shared by both Russia and Iran (Rouhani stating that Russia and Iran's position on Syria were "almost identical"⁵) – and indeed the West for that matter.

Of course, with every State acting in accordance with their own interests, it cannot be denied that Moscow and Tehran's interventions are not solely for securing the *legitimate* ruler of Syria, as they are for thwarting Western and in particular American influence and power in the region whilst furthering that of their own ambitions.

What remains to be seen however, is which of the two main backers' plans for Syria, the Assad regime will ultimately follow and adhere to, or at least to retain much needed diplomatic and military support. For as much as Iran and Russia

agree in principle in support of Syria, their positions are not identical and their reasons also differ to extents.

For instance, Syria is of utmost importance for Iran's regional affairs in that it serves as a nexus to their Lebanon-based proxy, Hezbollah strategically concentrated near the southern border with Israel and actively involved in Lebanese politics and social services, primarily for the Shi'a community. Naturally Hezbollah fighters have also been fighting alongside Syrian forces against rebel factions.

Whilst it would be incorrect to treat the alleged 'Shi'a crescent' as a factual, monolithic entity it would not be completely misplaced to describe a kind of proxy-war style Cold War taking place between regional rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran in several theatres, whereby zero-sum games apply in relation to Sunni-Shi'a geopolitics.

Another reason then, why Iran cannot afford to lose the political gains it had made in neighbouring Iraq post-Saddam or which help explain its reaching out to the Houthis in Yemen on Saudi's backyard so to speak.

Logistics may help explain some of

Russian interests in supporting the Syrian government with their port facility in Tartus. There is also speculation that they are set to expand the facility to accommodate larger warships and transport vessels⁶. There is also the reasonable concern about IS expanding its territory further, or ideologues returning to Russia's Caucasus region, namely the Muslim republics of Chechnya and Dagestan. Thus a strategy of containing the threat in the Middle East region far from Russian territory.

The obvious answer in regards to the question about Syria's direction, would be an alignment with Russian interests, given the bulk of substantial military and diplomatic support received, along with the fact that Russia has more international influence as a member of the UN Security Council than Iran, who only recently has begun a warm relationship with the West following the recent nuclear deal. This is not to say that Iranian involvement has not benefitted the Syrian government, for Iran has offered military intelligence, expertise and even manpower along with tactical support via Hezbollah. Nor is it

to say that direct Russian involvement is not in part due to Iranian insistence, as one Damascus based diplomat stated, *"The Iranians told the Russians bluntly: if you don't intervene, Bashar al-Assad will fall, and we are not in a position to keep propping him up"*⁷.

As Iranian and Russian interests converge from the strategic to the tactical, we can expect a more direct engagement on the ground from Iranian troops and irregular forces, along with Hezbollah fighters backed by Russian airstrikes – against both IS and pro-Western rebel targets in a bid to reclaim territory out of Assad's control. Foreign Shi'a fighters are not limited to irregular forces from Iran and Lebanon, but also include neighbouring Iraq, with some from Pakistan and Afghanistan entering via Iraq⁸.

It is important to remember, that even though the West has accepted that the Assad regime will remain for now, this is not to suggest that this sentiment is shared by neighbouring powers Turkey and Saudi Arabia both of whom will most likely continue to support means in which to destabilise and overthrow Assad from power thereby upsetting the

balance of power from Russia and Iran's favour. Therefore the conflict and its impact on civilians will be prolonged. There is also the risk of the sectarian element to this conflict becoming exacerbated should Assad reassert authority and control over IS or rebel territory, especially if perceived as a Shi'a consolidation by Salafi propagandists.

Whilst a decisive air campaign followed with an infantry offensive may diminish IS's capabilities in Syria, the persisting challenge will be the neo-jihadist ideology and networks that continue to transcend physical boundaries, not to mention the fact that IS are the wealthiest terrorist organisation in history, and funds won't simply just disappear. There will also be the need to extend such campaigns into Iraq, which

will involve greater collaboration with existing Western coalitions and the Kurds. Again, Iranian and Russian interests will no doubt converge on this issue.

However the divergence of Russia and Iran cannot be ruled out. Russian intervention in Syria – whilst changing the nature of the game for countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia – has also changed it for Iran. Russia has the upper hand – so to speak and Iran may not be able to pursue its regional policies with assertive independence as it did before. Iran would have to do a 'balancing act' in preserving its own interests in the region while closely following Russian interests and strategy in Syria.

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References:

¹ C Clausewitz, *On War*, F.N. Maude, L Willmot and T Griffith (eds), Wordsworth Editions, Hertfordshire, 1997, p5.

² Ibid, p22.

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⁴ <http://www.dnaindia.com/world/report-uk-softens-stand-on-syrian-president-bashar-al-assad-as-russia-gets-aggressive-2123624> Accessed 09/09/2015

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⁵ <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/09/28/uk-un-assembly-iran-idUKKCN0RR13G20150928> Accessed 29/09/2015

⁶ <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/why-russia-is-expanding-its-syrian-naval-base/531986.html> [Accessed 01/10/15]

⁷ http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/01/syrian-military-weakness-russian-intervention?CMP=share_btn_tw [Accessed 02/10/15]

⁸ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-expands-role-in-syria-in-conjunction-with-russias-airstrikes-1443811030> [Accessed 03/10/15]