



## AN ALLIANCE BASED ON COMMON INTERESTS: RUSSIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONS DURING THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

Ortak Çıkarlara Dayalı Bir İttifak: Suriye İç Savaşı Döneminde Rus-İran İlişkileri

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### MAKALE BİLGİSİ

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### ABSTRACT

NATO'nun doğuya doğru genişlemesi veya Orta Asya, Kafkasya veya Orta Doğu'daki krizlerde ABD'nin ve müttefiklerinin etkisinin artması hem Rusya hem de İran tarafından ulusal güvenliklerine tehdit olarak görülmektedir. Buna ilaveten Otoriter rejimlere ve onların uzun yıllardır devam eden politikalarına karşı bir tepki olarak başlayan Arap Baharı, Rusya ve İran açısından riskleri ve fırsatları da beraberinde getirmiştir. Bu kapsamda bu makale, halk hareketlerinin bir iç savaşa dönüştüğü ve bölgesel ve küresel birçok aktörü içine çeken bir sorun olan Suriye iç savaşını ele almaktadır. Suriye Krizi'nin başından itibaren konuları örtüşen Rusya ve İran arasındaki stratejik ortaklığın kurucu özellikleri iki ülke arasında öne çıkan ittifak ilişkisi Suriye iç savaşı bağlamında analiz edilmektedir. Her iki ülkenin de Suriye'de farklı hedefleri, gerçek ideolojik farklılıkları, İsrail'e ve enerji tedarikçileri olarak potansiyel rakiplerine karşı farklı politikaları var, bu nedenle Rusya-İran ilişkilerini Suriye Krizi çerçevesinde tipik bir stratejik ortaklık kurduklarını belirtmek zordur. Bu çerçevede mevcut çalışma Tahran ve Moskova yönetimleri arasında içsel ve dışsal faktörlerin zorlamasıyla Suriye sahasında işbirliği yapıldığı ve bunun da her iki aktörü başat düşmanları rakipleri karşısında daha korunaklı ve avantajlı hale getirdiği sonucuna varılmaktadır.

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### ÖZET

The eastward expansion of NATO or the increasing influence of the USA and its allies in crises in Central Asia, the Caucasus or the Middle East are seen as threats to their national security by both Russia and Iran. In addition, the Arab Spring, which started as a reaction against authoritarian regimes and their long-standing policies, brought risks and opportunities for Russia and Iran. In this context, this article deals with the Syrian civil war, which is a problem that has turned into a civil war and attracted many regional and global actors. The founding features of the strategic partnership between Russia and Iran, whose positions overlapped since the beginning of the Syrian Crisis, are analyzed in the context of the Syrian civil war. Both countries have different goals in Syria, real ideological differences, different policies towards Israel and their potential rivals as energy suppliers, so it is difficult to state that Russia-Iran relations have formed a typical strategic partnership within the framework of the Syria Crisis. In this context, the present study concludes that cooperation between the Tehran and Moscow administrations has been made in the Syrian field under the pressure of internal and external factors, and this has made both actors more sheltered and advantageous against their main enemies' competitors.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The ongoing crisis in Syria has had far-reaching consequences for international stability, as well as for Syria and the surrounding Middle Eastern region. The crisis was a watershed moment in Russian-Iranian relations in a number of ways. It has brought the two countries closer together, heightened bilateral interactions in a variety of industries and at a variety of levels, and fostered greater understanding and trust between Moscow and Tehran. Syria proved to be not just a litmus test for Russian-Iranian cooperation, but also a significant driver for further extending this cooperation in areas unrelated to the Syrian conflict. Russia's cooperation with Iran over Syria has shown remarkable durability. Numerous analysts and politicians particularly in the West have claimed that this contact is largely incidental, tactical, and unsustainable (Khlebnikov, 2020). They emphasized that Russian and Iranian objectives in Syria are not similar, that the two nations are not just partners, but also competitors in a broader regional context. Skeptics predicted a significant crisis in this relationship, which never materialized. At the same time, it would be naive to assert that Russian-Iranian relations have already developed into a genuine strategic cooperation-whether in Syria or elsewhere.

Numerous obstacles stand in the way of such a collaboration. Russia's and Iran's interests in Syria intersect, but not entirely. The two countries' opinions about regional security, terrorism, and a multipolar world are strikingly similar, as are their perceptions of Syria's future. Their disparate methods reflect historical, political, and geographical disparities, among other aspects. Despite these obstacles, it is essential to recognize the positive effects of the Russian-Iranian partnership, the fact that most of their goals were met, and the role they play as a model for collaboration in other settings and spheres. Iran and Russia have combated terrorism and defended Syria's legitimate government in the past. Additionally, it is critical to establish and coordinate post-war political regulations, which are frequently more complex. Since the nations' early interactions, Russian-Iranian relations have been difficult.

Up until the first protests of the Arab Spring and the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the relationship had its ups and downs. Both countries, which have well-documented revisionist ambitions and anti-US sentiment, found new points of convergence as a result of these events, introducing a new element into their relationship. Hereby, this study aims to analyze Russian and Iran relationship during the Syrian Civil War and to clarify goals of both countries that bring Russia and Iran together in Syria. Iran and Russia's common interests during the Syrian conflict will be analyzed. It also provides a particular emphasis on the economic factor especially gas exportation and how that can develop Iran into a basic competitor in this regard. Since 2011, Russia and Iran have reinforced their connections and collaboration in a variety of areas, creating the appearance of a robust partnership. As a result, this paper aims to analyze the Russian – Iranian relationship concerning the Syrian civil war and how far dose this relationship affect the ongoing Syrian crisis. This paper argues whether the present alliance between Russia and Iran will remain solid and consistent or change according to the variables that govern their relationship.

### **1. THE SITUATION IN SYRIA**

In order to fully grasp the Syrian situation, it is important to examine it from a variety of perspectives, including political, humanitarian, and religious ones. Practically every conflict of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whether it involved state or non-state actors, ethnic strife, terrorism, or hybrid warfare, contained elements of proxy war between major powers and regional entities. Under the Assad's rule, Alawite Shia traditions have been protected. Around 12% of the pre-war population are Alawites, a heterodox Muslim sect that is a branch of the more numerous Shi'a Bashar al-Assad, an Alawite, leads a secular, socialist, and highly militaristic dictatorship. Syria's regime regarded Tehran a key

player in the region sharing the same objectives due to Islamic political power in the Arab homeland. Relationships between Lebanon, Syria, and Iran were especially close. After 500 years, Iran was able to reassert its influence in the region and strengthen its force projection capabilities in the eastern Mediterranean after Saddam Hussein's overthrow in 2003. When 2011 came to a close, Tehran was confronted with geopolitical challenges not seen since the Iran-Iraq War. On one side of the Syrian conflict are the Syrian government forces and their allies in Iran, Russia, and other regional powers like Hezbollah. The United States, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey are just some of the countries and groups that provide financial and military support to the opposition.<sup>1</sup>

The moderate fighters in Syria are fragmented into several groups with varying viewpoints. In late 2013, rebel groups in Syria began fighting each other. The Syrian Free Army on January 3, 2014, began a large-scale campaign countering the Islamic State (IS) another terrorist group fighting against Bashar al-Assad's regime. Because of the strike, the conflict has taken on new meaning. The Assad regime in Syria has been dependent on international aid during the whole length of the country's civil war. Both Moscow and Tehran are currently supporting the Assad regime in Syria. Despite their divergent regional interests, Russia and Iran cooperated to keep Assad in power.

### **1.1. Iran's Presence During the Uprisings in Syria**

Hafez al-Assad laid the groundwork for the Iranian-Syrian alliance by forging close ties with Imam Khomeini. By working together, Iran was able to secure a prime location on the Mediterranean and gain substantial footholds in the Arab Middle East. Long term military cooperation was formally established between Iran and Syria in 2006 when they signed a mutual defense treaty and formed a joint Iranian-Syrian Supreme Defense Commission. Under mounting international pressure, Iran and Syria made efforts to renew their 1980s era partnership (Saab, 2006). A government transition in Syria might undo the imbalance in power that the Iraqi war produced in favor of Iran. It is more desirable for the new Syria to align with the Sunni nations, as they have maintained strong ties to the West. Iran has always kept a careful eye on what's happening in Syria. Considering that no other Arab regime in the Middle East backs Iran, it makes sense that Tehran would take any measures necessary to safeguard the Assad regime. Iran actively helped the Assad government by providing arms and ammunition, as well as providing military instruction and troops.

If the Syrian regime fell, it would be a major setback for Iran's regional objectives. Iran uses Shiite groups in Lebanon, especially Hezbollah, as a tool to exert pressure on Israel, and the Assad dictatorship is pivotal to Iran's backing for these groups. The Shiite coalition including Damascus, Baghdad, Tehran, and Hezbollah in Lebanon would crumble in the event of a government change in Syria. As a result, Iran's political and diplomatic clout in the area would drastically diminish.

Washington and its allies could put more pressure on Tehran to topple the regime there if they lost Syria, which would come at a time when they were trying to impose a siege on Iran. Iran has denied helping the Syrian government crush protesters and has spoken out against western claims that it is aiding the Syrian government's security forces (Rammal, 2012).

### **1.2. Russia's Presence During the Uprisings in Syria**

Since widespread unrest broke out in Syria in March 2011, Moscow's position has been consistent: to keep things as they are and to back President Assad's Syrian regime. Russia says it is fighting ISIS and other extremists in Syria to justify staying in the country. Following the failure to project hard force and effectively protect geopolitical interests in the Ukrainian and Georgian conflicts, Russia saw a

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<sup>1</sup> The Syria policy of these countries has changed over time especially after the Russian military intervention on 30 September 2015.

chance in the Syrian crisis to show the West, and especially the United States, that it could do so. Maintaining control over oil supplies to Europe is a primary motivation for Russia in its efforts to keep the Assad government in power. With the Syrian Civil War hopefully coming to an end soon, Moscow plans to resume trade with the region's other major oil producers (Sekulow, 2017, p. 168). It was on September 30, 2015, that Russia began its military intervention in Syria. Russia has previously provided diplomatic and military support to Assad's government. Dmitry Medvedev, the prime minister of Russia, spoke at the Munich Security Conference in February 2016 and stated, "We must preserve Syria's unity and avert its fragmentation" in a reference to Russia's support for Bashar al-Assad. "We will not stand for the world to experience another Libya, Yemen, or Afghanistan" (Kryuchkov & Braterski, 2016). Russia is strongly opposed to NATO-led regime change operations like those in Libya and Afghanistan.

Russian policy toward Syria is driven by four main considerations: To begin, independence from outside interference in family disputes. This has been a major issue for Russians over the past two decades due to their perception of Western involvement in the unjust marginalization of Russian sovereignty throughout the 1990s and their recognition of the country's own internal limitations and weaknesses. Russia overstates the extent to which the West was involved in "color revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan as well as the Arab Spring. Russia's decision to abstain from voting on the resolution at the UN Security Council on Libya was heavily criticized (Dyomkin & Al-Khalidi, 2016).

Second, the projection of strength and the strategic positioning of nations. As the lone Russian military outpost in the Middle East, Syria is of paramount importance to Moscow. For over 40 years, the Assad family has counted on the support of Russia and the Soviet Union. Over the past few decades, Russia's influence in the Middle East has diminished. For Russia, the proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia and its allies is the most important aspect of the Arab Spring. Saudi Arabia's followers in Central Asia and the Northern Caucasus are effectively Russia's enemies, while Iran has friends such as the Northern Alliance who have traditionally been on Russia's side. The significance of this development for Moscow's geopolitical standing is immense (Dyomkin & Al-Khalidi, 2016).

Third, concern that Russia's minorities may become radicalized. The growing of Islamic fundamentalism across the Muslim world having portions of Russia is a major source of concern for Russia, especially in the Northern Caucasus. Russia maintains that democratic revolutions provide radical organizations a foothold, opening the door to terrorist attacks and separatist movements. Worries over the safety of non-Sunni minority and the collapse of Assad's rule have prompted Russian concern. In addition, the Northern Caucasus is home to a sizeable Circassian population estimated at between 200 and 300,000 people.

Fourth, the Ukrainian problem has been discussed with Western countries. Russia views that as a difficult problem besides being more sensitive. Putin could use the conflict in Syria to negotiate with the West over Eastern Ukraine and sanctions. The public's awareness of Russian military activities has increased, and the possibility that Russia is using the European migration crisis to exert covert influence over people seeking asylum in Europe has been raised. The international community was caught off guard by Putin's announcement on March 14 that Russia would be withdrawing the majority of its forces from Syria (Dyomkin & Al-Khalidi, 2016). Neither the Russian bases in Latakia nor Tartus were affected by this declaration, and no timeline was given. Russia's shaky economy is taking a beating from the Syrian involvement, but Moscow is pouring money into the country anyhow.

## **2. INTERCHANGE of RUSSIA-IRAN'S INTERESTS IN SYRIA**

The destruction of IS was the one element unifying most of the parties in Syria, it was not the major reason Russia participated. This presented a new challenge for the Syrian government, which was already fighting against anti-government groups and Islamic State (IS). Qassim Soleimani, the former chief of the Iranian Quds Force, initiated a series of high-level talks between the Syrians and the Russians when the outlook for the government appeared dismal in the summer of 2015 (Bassam & Perry, 2015). Over time, a rare mix of U.S -led global coalition operations against IS in conjunction with local SDF troops, and Russian advise, enabling capabilities, and firepower, against anti-regime terrorists of the Syrian opposition, emerged. On the ground, irregulars like Hezbollah, Russian special operations personnel, and private military businesses backed Syrian government forces and held area once it was liberated (Kofman, 2017).

About 110,000 individuals, including Shia militia members, Quds Force advisers, and Hezbollah combatants, were produced by Iran (Jones, 2019, p. 5). The military engagement of both Russia and the United States in Syria is still on the low end of the spectrum. Both the United States and Russia have vested interests in maintaining their respective levels of influence on the existing system. They are both striving to realize their policy goals on a shoestring budget. Moscow's primary contributions have been in the areas of command and control, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and air support for a wide variety of ground partner troops. Russia has depended on Iranian-backed proxies like Hezbollah to keep a presence across Syria, in addition to the Tiger Forces, a Syrian government-affiliated militia, for the most arduous clearing tasks in primarily urban areas (Waters, 2018). To avoid escalating the crisis, Russia has shown remarkable restraint by not increasing its engagement. For instance, when the United States airstrikes killed 200 Wagner Group mercenaries and pro-Assad fighters in Deir El-Zour, Russia did almost nothing to retaliate. Israel's bombing of Iranian targets in Syria goes on, and there are deep disagreements between Russia and Turkey over the region of Idlib (Weiss & Ng, 2019, p. 3).

### **2.1. Russia and Iran's Diversifying Goals in Syria and Beyond**

Russia and Iran both seek to refocus the Syrian peace process away from Assad's departure and toward humanitarian concerns and a cessation of fighting. Assuring Syria's territorial integrity and reducing the likelihood of violence in Syria are in both countries' national interests (Cengiz, 2020, p. 11). Their divergent objectives, however, preclude them from elevating their relationship to a solid strategic level, even if they are close military allies in Syria.

To begin, despite their shared grasp of global and regional issues, Russia and Iran have significant ideological differences. Russia is still searching for its national identity and national idea following the collapse of the USSR and Soviet Communism, although it is a thoroughly secular state. In contrast to Russia, Iran proceeded on the path of establishing a theocratic pan-Islamist state in accordance with Islamic theology following the 1979 revolution. Iran's diplomatic embrace of Russia appears to be motivated by a wish to defend Khomeinism in foreign policy affairs (Therme, 2018, p. 552). Meanwhile, Moscow has avoided sectarian violence in the Middle East. Russia, as a key friend of Shiite regimes, has maintained extensive contacts with Sunnis, particularly the Saudis and Turks. As a second point, several scholarly works highlight the significance that Syria has played in Russia's attempt to redefine its status as a global player and an essential conversation partner of the western nations in global and regional security control (Trenin, 2015).

Russia's participation in Syria was driven by real worries about rising global instability as well as it hopes to form progressive international standards such as the responsibility to protect. Whether it's the spread of democracy in the region, the removal of hostile anti-Western regimes, or the containment of the rising influence of regional powers like Iran, Russia's norms reflect its own views

on the most effective ways to address these global crises to further its own geopolitical and ideological interests (Krickovic & Weber, 2018, p. 7).

Thus, a robust cooperation with Iran is critical for Russia's goal to reaffirm its power status in the face of U.S. hostility. However, similar to Syria's instrumentality, Russia's foreign policy toward Iran is characterized by pragmatism. From the Russian perspective, relations with Iran remain secondary to the country's global policy or relations with the United States. Russia, for example, would not jeopardize its reputation as a responsible international power in order to rein in Iran's nuclear development. The bulk of Iranian political analysts are cautious and opposed to a Russia-Iran collaboration. They feel Russia as an untrustworthy ally who might jeopardize Iran's interests greatly (Asisian, 2013).

The involvement of Iran in the Palestinian struggle has complicated matters, and it is driven by three factors. First, Iran needs to prove its resistance credentials by showing its dedication to the Palestinian cause, as this is the traditional epicenter of resistance in the Arab and Muslim nations. Also, at the time of the establishment of the Islamic Republic, only Syria which shares a border with both Israel and Palestine supported Iran. The Palestinian conflict offered Iran an enticing point of entry as it pondered expanding its sphere of influence into adjacent Arab nations. Third, Iran needed to compete with what it sees as its primary regional opponent Israel if it wanted to be recognized as a regional force (Tabatabai et al., 2021, p. 13).

Thirdly, there is an unspoken rivalry between Russia and Iran for influence in Syria, as both seek to be the main external player. Syria's civil war has converted the country from a shadow state dominated by the security apparatus into a transactional state governed by various regime-aligned profiteers. Russia is trying to alter Syrian institutions in order to ensure long-term devotion to Moscow, while Iran is implanting influence both within and beyond Syrian governmental institutions. Russia is attempting to get the advantage in its dealings with Syria by tying Syria inextricably to Moscow's agenda (Khatib & Sinjab, 2018, p. 2).

Fourthly, Iran and Russia hold opposing positions on Israel. Iran regards Israel as an adversary or a major Middle East rival, although Russia has always maintained diplomatic relations with Israel. Russia has made a concerted effort to consider Israel's interests while planning its operations in Syria. This, however, is exceedingly difficult for Iran. For example, in response to Tel Aviv's requests, Russia was obligated to bring an end to the presence of Iranian fighters in Syria, if not to their presence entirely, then to their evacuation from Israel-controlled regions. Moscow began discussing the possibility of establishing zones of reduced hostility in southern Syria in the summer of 2017 (Tasnim News Agency, 2017).

The U.S has emphasized the importance of liberating Syria not from terrorist groups but from Iranian soldiers. Finally, despite the fact that the EAEU-Iran temporary agreement comes into force in October 2019, there are significant challenges in changing the interim deal with a permanent one. A significant impediment to EAEU-Iran economic cooperation is the EAEU's ongoing free trade negotiations with Israel (Smagin, 2021). Russia, which imports a significant portion of its energy needs, recognizes the strategic importance of Syria as a transit route for natural gas bound for Europe (Cengiz, 2020, p. 9). Moscow's economic motivations for intervening in Syria are to integrate a regional energy network and maintain Russia's regional energy dominance within it. It will provide Russia the ability to exert influence over the energy supply to the European market.

As a result, Russia supports the proposed Iran-Iraq-Syria Friendship Pipeline, which would connect the Iranian Pars gas reserves to the Mediterranean and Lebanon via Iraq, Syria (Maher & Pieper, 2021, p. 4). Russia and Iran will almost certainly compete for hegemony within the Islamic Pipeline.

Furthermore, both Iran and Russia's economy are based on the oil and gas sector. Thus, the EAEU is unable to offer Iran anything comparable to what China can offer. And, given Russia's hegemonic position in the EAEU's energy markets, Iran cannot significantly boost its energy supply to the EAEU without Russia's approval (Smagin, 2021). Iran has the potential to overtake Russia as a major competitor in gas exports due to the two countries' shared energy export and consumption markets (Therme, 2018, p. 551).

### **3. A SYRIAN MEASUREMENT**

Syria's government is fighting armed opposition forces backed by Gulf monarchies and Western countries, and Russia and Iran are providing financial and military aid to the Syrian government for different reasons. Tehran and Moscow may count it as a diplomatic victory that they have kept Bashar al-Assad in power since the Syrian crisis. A cost has been incurred, though. Iran's ties to the Gulf governments, which support many of the key opposition organizations in Syria, have weakened because of Tehran's stance in backing of the Assad regime. Since Russia's military involvement in Syria began in October 2015, however, Saudi Arabia has shown signs of wanting to cut its losses there and mend fences with Russia. It wasn't until King Salman's historic trip to Russia in October 2017 that a Saudi monarch had ever set foot in Russia. During his visit, he and President Vladimir Putin talked about energy cooperation and Saudi investment in Russia (Therme, 2018, p. 554).

As a result of their support for a regime that is opposed by the majority of Syrians, Russia and Iran have lost favor in Arab public opinion despite Saudi Arabia's official support for the Astana diplomatic process sponsored by Russia, Iran, and Turkey. There has been no direct military action taken by the West against al-Assad, but it has supported rebel groups and taken action against ISIS. Although the regional security situation for Iran would be ideal without the Russian military engagement in Syria, the Islamic Republic must now adjust its traditional response to the situation. The Iranian government's stance against global power dominance looks to be challenged by Russia's military participation in Syria.

The Iranian regime's inability to address internal objections to the high cost of intervention is more concerning for the future of joint Iranian-Russian military action in Syria. During the demonstrations at the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018, people chanted Death to Hezbollah, referring to the Iranian-backed Lebanese Shi'i militia associated with the Assad dictatorship, and Leave Syria alone, worry about us (Therme, 2018, p. 555). Many Iranians are not content with the Islamic Republic's justifications for its presence in the region and its alliance with Russia by pointing to ISIS as evidence that these policies are justified.

#### **3.1. Russia and Iran Dual Involvement in Syria**

Russia's goals of keeping its military access to the Mediterranean, keeping its dominance over Syria, and re-establishing its influence in the wider region and international arena compelled it to align with Iran to reinforce Assad's position. Their partnership is based on a mutual dislike of American preeminence in setting global standards and a desire to compete with the United States. Moscow considers its relations with Tehran not as a strategic alliance but rather a marriage of convenience. This emerges from the attitude of mistrust which characterized their relationship. Yet, the cooperation on the military and ministerial level is still present between the two countries. Both Russia and Iran depend on one another when operating ground operations.

Tehran is able to conduct a ground activity under the cover of Russia's airstrikes. At the same time, Russia needs Iranian and Syrian ground troops to strengthen a hold for al-Assad's power. Some of the coordination between Russia and Iran is done by the Syrian forces and some is done by the center of

intelligence sharing in Baghdad by Iraqi, Russian, Syrian, and Iranian officials. Iran has allowed Moscow to use Iran's air to transport fighting forces to Syria. But their relationship has passed through challenges like the absent of a united language besides the various groups of command.

Not only that, Moscow was surprised of Tehran's forces capacity and arrangement. Moscow, many times, has to command ground fighters to aid Syrian troops with fire, an action which should be accomplished by those of Iran. This constitutes a point of tension in the dual relations of both particularly when Russia has attempted to avoid itself from involving in ground fight. Each Russia or Iran doesn't exchange their strategic resolutions. Russia, most possibly, informed General Qassim Soleimani during his visit to Moscow in July, 2015, of initiating airstrikes in Syria. And on the contrary, Russia's withdrawal from Syria in March, 2016 was a unilateral decision taken by Russia without consulting Iran on that. Splits characterized Russian-Iranian relationship despite their being a unified front when compared to the coalition led by the US. Many analysts anticipate that links between Russia and Iran will worsen due to some aspects of tension.

### **3.2. International and Regional Factors in the Syrian Civil War**

Several countries and organizations outside of Syria have paid attention to the crisis there including Russia, Iran, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and others. The focus here is on the first two countries mentioned: Russia and Iran. Putin was able to make his way back to the Middle East after the fall of the Soviet Union. Old and new ties have been flourished during his era. Pragmatic and non-ideational is the current foreign policy of Russia (Stent, 2019, p. 243; Kalaycı, 2021, pp. 134-143; Kalaycı, 2019, pp. 533-553).

Vyascheslav Nikanov, a member of the Duma, has outlined Russia's objectives in the Middle East, which include preventing the return of Russians who fought alongside ISIS in Syria and protecting Russia's security (Stent, 2019, p. 242). The motivations behind Russia and Iran's backing of the al Assad regime are complex. Russia can gain international prestige and prestige in international diplomacy by taking advantage of the Syrian crisis. Syria is just like a gallery for selling weapons, and all are being tested in Syria. Russia also has a particular perception of the radical Islamists connected with Chechenia conflict. A Great Islamic Revolution is the Arab Spring to Russia. What confirmed Russian attitude is the new governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen which brought neither democracy nor stability (Crosston, 2014, p. 97).

Russia's foreign policy is solid in defending al Assad authority from the start of the Syrian conflict. Putin's reaction is decisive in countering western tries to overthrow Assad. The coming of European leaders to Putin about Syria is victory and thus Russia has become a diplomacy center in Syria. Putin will not let the Libyan scenario to be repeated in Syria. Russia believes in negotiations with the opposition as the only solution for the Syrian conflict. According to the viewpoint of the U.S, the end of the crisis lies in the end of al-Assad authority and refuses the Russian military campaign in Syria (Vysotsky, 2014, p. 59; Stent, 2019, p. 254; Crosston, 2014, p. 99). Putin justified his engagement in Syria when he said that only terrorists will benefit from Assad's fall and that strengthening institutions of the state in the areas of struggle is important (Stent, 2019, p. 254).

Despite the ideological differences between Khomeini and Syria's Baath, Iran supports Syria throughout the civil war. In Tehran, an Islamic Awakening conference was held in February 2012 while considering the Syrian uprising as a conspiracy plotted by the West. Iran's leaders announced that they assist al Assad against the US, Israel, and extremism. Hezbollah provided armed assistance to Syria so as to protect the holy shrines of Shia's (Erlich, 2014, pp. 151-152). Iran executed military operations besides Russian forces in September 2015. Military and paramilitary approximately 6.500 to 9.200 fighters are sent to Syria by Iran including the special forces (Artech). Moreover, Iran



recruited, trained and ordered a large number of Shia's from Pakistan, Iraq, and Afghanistan to fight on al Assad's side (Rabi & Freidman 2017, p. 12).

### **3.3. Russia and Iran's Impulses in Syrian Crisis**

The recency of the Caesar Act and in what way it is directed to punish allies of al Assad. Iran as well as Russia have spent billions of dollars since their involvement in Syria (Schaffner, 2021). Asine qua non to provide continuous economic support to survive al Assad authority by Russia and Iran, is an assumption in the Caesar Act. Caesar Act imposes economic pressure to urge Iran and Russia to be aware of their economic calculations in aiding Bashar al Assad (Landis and Simon, 2020; Sahloul et al., 2020). Syria, for both isolated powers Iran and Russia, is a springboard to increase their effect in the region. Iran intends to broaden its secret and unofficial networks of power on the ground and among Syria's quorum. Whereas Russia works to get institutional and legitimate a victory in the battle on behalf of Bashar on a worldwide level (Hatahet, 2019, p. 3).

Since the 1979 revolution in Iran, Syria has assisted Iran in its regional struggles. Iran has formed a regional network of pro-Iranian militias. Moreover, Hezbollah and Hamas represent Iran's proxies as a first front vs Israel (Goodarzi, 2013, p. 1). The IRGC coordinated activities against Israel. It consists of about 7000 troops in east side and the south side of Syria. And the IRGC has control over 30000 non-Syrian fighters including 6-8000 fighters of Hezbollah in Lebanon in addition to Afghans and Iraqi Shias (Kozak, 2017, p. 2).

On the south part of Syria, Tehran exploited the Syrian civil conflict to build a military substructure there in order to resist Israel. According to the recent overturn in the linkage between the Gulf states and Israel, Trump tries to construct a strategic assent on Iran. Unlike Trump, Biden has distanced himself away from pro-Israel and pro-Saudi Arabia status. Syria, to Moscow, is part of a project to prove Russia as a powerful player in the global issues especially against the regime change planned by the U.S. In the 2012 Geneva process, Russia protected Syria from international inspection in the UNSC. Russia is a member in the ISSG, the International Support Group for Syria, fixed the basis for UNSCR 2254 in 2015. Those documents called for domestic solution for the Syrian crisis instead of calling for al Assad departure. Russia aims at resuming the UN Charter and thus considering state's opposition movements plotted by another state as a kind of illegal aggression in the international law (Allison, 2017).

### **3.4. Russian-Iranian Contest on Syria**

The two friends, Russia and Iran, who had previously worked together for Bashar's victory, saw their tensions and even their animosity rise again after the rebellion was crushed and Bashar al-Assad's power was secured. Of course, this isn't a zero-sum game, especially considering the extent to which both countries are still working together on a variety of topics relating to Syria and beyond. Each Russia and Iran view establishing a stronghold in Syria as a strategic priority, and both are willing to sacrifice the other to achieve their own goals. Their ultimate objective is to drive a shared adversary, the United States, out of the area (Behravesch & Cafiero, 2019).

Syria is a key link in Iran's plans to build an overland route from Iran through Iraq and into Lebanon, and Tehran also aims to use Syria as a forward base to launch attacks against its opponents, especially the U.S and Israel. Iran has been working to establish Shiite militias from throughout the Middle East in Syria for the past decade. There were also modern missiles, air defense systems, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) delivered by Iran, along with conventional Iranian personnel. Since the stationing of Iranian boats or planes in Syria may offer Iran deterrent ability and potentially

threaten Israel, Iran has also attempted to get a grip on ports like Latakia and on Syrian airfields, for both military and economic reasons (Zisser, 2021, p. 11).

To further consolidate and guarantee the Iranian presence in Syria, the Iranians have actively promoted a process of Shiization among the Alawite community, and even among the Sunnis. Iran is concerned that Russia may approve for Israel air strikes in Syria as part of the Kremlin double game in the region. Russia is also concerned that Iran may get a strong hold in Syria, civilian and military, which led to Syria's instability. The Russian game could push Russia to cooperate with the U.S and Israel politically to drive out Iran of Syria. Bashar al-Assad is working to balance between the allies. His alliance with Moscow and its patronage is prior although he still demands retaining Iran's relation and Hezbollah's. In fact, they aided him first and caused him to gain victory in the ground battles. Bashar is conscious that the Iranians worked to secure a hold in Syria by depending on Shiite militia from outside Syria. This change is important for Russia and al-Assad and it is normal to find reports which emphasized Bashar's tries to limit Iran's existence (Zisser, 2021, pp. 11-12). From the Russian Iranian contest in Syria, some of the main findings are: Competition for influence: Both Russia and Iran have sought to increase their influence in Syria and the broader Middle East, and their contest has been driven in part by a desire to assert their dominance in the region. Differences in approach: While both countries have supported the Assad government, they have taken different approaches to the conflict. Russia has focused on military support and has been involved in several major offensives against rebel groups. Iran, on the other hand, has taken a more nuanced approach, providing support to a range of factions and working to maintain its influence through its network of proxy groups. Strategic cooperation: Despite their competition, Russia and Iran have also maintained a strategic alliance and have worked together to support their shared interests in Syria. For example, they have coordinated their military efforts and have sought to undermine US and Western influence in the region. Effect on the Syrian conflict: The Russian-Iranian contest has had a significant impact on the Syrian conflict, shaping the trajectory of the war and affecting the outcome of the peace negotiations. The two countries have used their leverage over the Syrian government to advance their respective interests and have helped to prolong the conflict by providing military and political support to the Assad regime.

## **CONCLUSION**

Since the Syrian crisis began, the relationship between Russia and Iran has strengthened significantly. Iran fought back against Russia's sophisticated air force and intelligence assistance by organizing Hezbollah and other volunteer forces. Russia and Iran coordinated their political and military efforts in Syria because they both saw the conflict as a threat to their respective national interests, spheres of influence, and even territorial integrity. They both share a dislike for the current situation and American unilateralism.

For Russia to maintain its status as a great power, it makes sense for it to forge a regional alliance with Iran. To avoid a repeat of Libya, they work together to implement a similar political transformation in Syria. Democracy is not always preferable to autocracy, a view shared by Moscow and Tehran. Russia and Iran's positions on Syria have been consistent from the beginning of the crisis. Keeping Syria's territorial integrity intact is in everyone's best interest, both economically and politically.

External interference accelerated the transformation of Syria's internal crisis into an international one, calling into question the Syrian State's very existence. Russia and Iran's engagement in this regard has been critical for Syria, and their combined impact on the development of the Syrian crisis resolution process has been beneficial. Syria's division and Bashar al-Assad's toppling have been averted. It is a reality that Russian-Iranian relations have never been closer in Syria than they are

today. Their interaction as stakeholders is critical for the success of the Syrian peace process and the realization of their separate geopolitical goals.

Russia is cautious about expanding its cooperation with Iran because it does not want to affect its relationship with the regional actors, but it is interested in the long-term benefits of its partnership with Iran. It follows that Russia is concerned that Iran could become a formidable rival. However, Iran is worried that Russia will make deals with its regional rivals, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel, and thereby weaken Iran's position. Despite this, the shared goals and interests of the two organizations have helped to reduce tensions. As long as the foundations of their primary areas of cooperation remain intact, it is clear that Russia and Iran will continue to benefit from their alliance. After the danger has passed, however, bilateral cooperation may shift to competition over individual goals.

From all the above-mentioned information about the alliance between Russia and Iran in Syria, some of the main findings include: Joint military efforts: Russia and Iran have coordinated their military efforts in Syria and have provided support to the government of President Bashar al-Assad. This cooperation has been key to the survival of the Assad regime and has helped to prolong the conflict in Syria. Countering US influence: Both Russia and Iran have sought to counter US influence in the Middle East and have used their partnership to undermine US interests in the region. This has included efforts to limit US involvement in the Syrian conflict and to counter US sanctions against Iran. Strategic coordination: Despite their competition in other areas of the Middle East, Russia and Iran have maintained close coordination on a range of strategic issues. For example, they have worked together to support the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah and to counter US and Western influence in the region. Energy and economic cooperation: Russia and Iran have also deepened their economic ties, with Russia providing support for Iran's energy sector and the two countries working together on a range of economic initiatives. This has helped to mitigate the impact of US sanctions against Iran and has strengthened the overall economic relationship between the two countries.

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