

Russia Constrains Iran



Poster showing Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, Syrian President Bashar Assad, and Russian President Vladimir Putin (ABNA News - Iran)

In an astounding series of statements, Russia has made it clear that it expects all foreign forces to withdraw from Syria. Alexander Lavrentiev, President Putin's envoy to Syria, specified on May 18, 2018, that all "foreign forces" meant those forces belonging to Iran, Turkey, the United States, and Hizbullah.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov added this week that only Syrian troops should have a presence on the country's southern border, close to Jordan and Israel. Previously, Russia had been a party to the establishment of a "de-escalation zone" in southwestern Syria along with the United States and Jordan. Now, Russian policy was becoming more ambitious. Lavrov added that a pullback of all non-Syrian forces from the de-escalation zone had to be fast.

The regime in Tehran got the message and issued a sharp rebuke of its Russian ally. The Iranians did not see their deployment in Syria as temporary. Five years ago, a leading religious figure associated with the Revolutionary Guards declared that Syria was the 35th province of Iran. Besides such ideological statements, on a practical level, Syria hosts the logistical network for Iranian resupply of its most critical Middle Eastern proxy force, Hizbullah, which has acquired significance beyond the struggle for Lebanon.

Over the years, Hizbullah has become involved in military operations in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and elsewhere. Without Syria, Iran's ability to project power and influence in an assortment of Middle Eastern conflicts would be far

more constrained. Syria has become pivotal for Tehran's quest for a land corridor linking Iran's western border to the Mediterranean. The fact that Iran was operating ten military bases in Syria made its presence appear to be anything but temporary.

Already in February 2018, the first public signs of discord between Russia and Iran became visible. At the Valdai Conference in Moscow, attended by both Lavrov and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (and by this author), the Russian Foreign Minister articulated his strong differences with the Iranians over their pronouncements regarding Israel: "We have stated many times that we won't accept the statements that Israel, as a Zionist state, should be destroyed and wiped off the map. I believe this is an absolutely wrong way to advance one's own interests."

Iran was hardly a perfect partner for Russia. True, some Russian specialists argued that Moscow's problems with Islamic militancy emanated from the jihadists of *Sunni* Islam, but not from *Shiite* Islam, which had been dominant in Iran since the 16th century. But that was a superficial assessment. Iran was also backing Palestinian Sunni militants like Islamic Jihad and Hamas. This May, Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, told a pro-Hizbullah television channel that he had regular contacts with Tehran.

Iran Supports both Shiites and Sunnis

Iran was also supporting other Sunni organizations like the Taliban and the Haqqani network in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It harbored senior leaders from al-Qaeda. Indeed, when the founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, sought a regional sanctuary after the fall of Afghanistan to the United States, he did not flee to Pakistan, but instead, he moved to Iran. There is no reason why Iran could not provide critical backing for Russia's adversaries in the future.

But, that was not the perception in Moscow when Russia gave its initial backing for the Iranian intervention in Syria. In the spring of 2015, Moscow noted that the security situation in Central Asia was deteriorating, as internal threats to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan were increasing. On top of all this, the Islamic State (IS) was making its debut in Afghanistan. An IS victory in Syria would have implications for the security of the Muslim-populated areas of Russia itself.¹

It was in this context that Russia dramatically increased arms shipments to its allies in Syria. It also coordinated with Iran the deployment of thousands of Shiite fighters from Iraq and Afghanistan under the command of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). That also meant the construction of an expanded military infrastructure on Syrian soil for this Shiite foreign legion.

At the same time, Russia maintained and upgraded a naval base at the Syrian city of Tartus and an air facility at the Khmeimim Air Base near Latakia. Moscow also had access to other Syrian facilities as well.

Russia Achieved Its Main Goal and Changed Its Policy

What changed in Moscow? It appears that the Kremlin began to understand that Iran handicapped Russia's ability to realize its interests in the Middle East. The Russians had secured many achievements with their Syrian policy since 2015. They had constructed a considerable military presence that included air and sea ports under their control in Syria. They had demonstrated across the Middle East that they were not prepared to sell out their client, President Bashar Assad, no matter how repugnant his military policies had become – including the repeated use of chemical weapons against his own civilian population. The Russians successfully converted their political reliability into a diplomatic asset, which the Arabs contrasted with the Obama administration's poor treatment of President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt at the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011. However, now Iran was putting Russia's achievements at risk, through a policy of escalation with Israel.

The Russian security establishment appeared to understand from the start that Israel's strategy in Syria was essentially defensive. For example, Israel wanted to prevent the delivery of weapons to Hizbullah that could alter the military balance in its favor. One feature of Russian military policy at a very early stage was the *carte blanche* Moscow appeared to give Israel to strike at these weapons deliveries and later at Iranian facilities across Syria.

According to one report, a Moscow think tank, closely identified with President Putin, published a commentary blaming Iran for the deteriorating situation between Iran and Israel in the Syrian theater. The Sunni Arab states, which Russia was courting, were also voicing their concerns with growing Iranian

activism. Undoubtedly, the Russians noticed the complaints that came from Tajikistan this year that Iran was seeking to destabilize the country by funding militant Islamists.



Russian President Putin meets with Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mohammed Khatami in 2015 (*Kremlin*)

Putin seemed to have growing reservations about Iran's policy of exporting the Islamic revolution from the soil of Syria. Now, with IS fundamentally vanquished, Iranian military activity in Syria lost its primary justification. And if Moscow was considering to more closely coordinate its Middle Eastern policy with Washington in the future, it needed to adjust its approach to Iran.²

On May 22, 2018, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo listed aspects of Iranian activism which the United States was now demanding that Iran halt. It was not surprising to see in Pompeo's list the demand that "Iran must withdraw all forces under Iranian command throughout the entirety [of] Syria."

Russia is not cutting its ties with Iran. But it is clearly cutting back Iran's freedom of action in Syria. The idea that Russia would back Iran's use of Syria as a platform for operations against Israel or Jordan is not tenable. Still, Russia would remain the primary supplier of Bashar Assad's army in Syria as well as his strategic partner. Unquestionably, Iran would need to reassess its Middle Eastern strategy after Moscow's pronouncements calling for it to leave Syria and not

continue to be perceived as the force that put at risk all that Russia had achieved as a result of the Syrian civil war.

Source: <http://jcpa.org/russia-constrains-iran/>

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