

The rocky marriage of convenience between Russia and Iran in Syria



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

The tensions between Iran and Russia about Iran's continued presence and the nature of its activities in Syria are expected to continue and even worsen.

(January 30, 2019 / The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs) The latest round of attacks by the Israeli Air Force on Iranian targets in Syria on Jan. 24 revealed the growing tensions in the relations between Iran and Russia regarding military activities in Syria.

The most recent expression of the strains came from Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, the head of the Committee for National Security and Foreign Policy in the Iranian Majlis. He strongly criticized the Russian forces in Syria who turned off their S-300 air-defense systems during the last attack of the Israeli Air Force in Syria.

According to several reports, the attacks on the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Al Quds Force targets killed several Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and Syrian soldiers. Falahatpisheh said that if the Russian defense systems had been functioning properly, Israel would not have been able to carry out the attack. The committee head also suggested that "there seems to be synchronization between the Zionist regime's attacks and the Russian air defense systems in Syria."¹

Iran's current response against Russian policy in Syria resembles the one made after the Israeli Air Force attacked IRGC targets in May 2018. Beneath the surface, tensions continue to sizzle between the two countries regarding their military presence and deployment in Syria and their ultimate goals on the "day after" Syria is stabilized and its political orientation is set. *Der Spiegel* recently reported on battles between Syrian units, with some loyal to Russia and some loyal to Iran.² Scores of combatants were reportedly killed.

Following the attack in May 2018, the official Islamic Republic News

Agency *IRNA* criticized Russia beneath the headline, “Where does Russia stand after the Zionist Regime’s attacks on Syria?” The publication emphasized that the two countries’ relationship is more of a “marriage of convenience” than a “strategic alliance.” *IRNA* contended that Russia was not at ease in its relations with Iran in Syria. The tension between the two stems from Moscow’s desire to maintain good relations with Israel.³



The publication featured a photo of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Furthermore, an Iranian website dealing with pan-Islamic issues that supports the Iranian presence in Syria also criticized Russia (and Iranian forces stationed in Syria) for failing to protect IRGC military forces operating in the T-4 airbase in Syria when Israel attacked it in May 2018. Several Iranians were killed. (See photo gallery of casualties.)



Iranian soldiers and officers killed in Syria in an Israeli raid in 2018.

Russia, the website charged, is only concerned about its own soldiers, and it urged Iranian commanders to demand that Russia provide protection also for Iranian soldiers stationed in bases in Syria, wondering “what kind of an alliance is this with Russia?”⁴

‘Russia is committed to the security of Israel’

Signs of Russian-Iranian tensions over Syrian policy can also be found in an interview given to *CNN* on Jan. 25, 2018⁵ by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov. A day after the criticism by the Iranian head of the National Security and Foreign Policy in the Iranian Majlis, Ryabkov explained that Iran and Russia are not allies in Syria and that Moscow is committed to the security of Israel and is opposed to Iran’s hostile activities toward Israel. When asked whether Iran is Russia’s ally in Syria, Ryabkov replied:

*I wouldn’t use this type of words (allies) to describe where we are with Iran. We in no way underestimate the importance of security measures that would ensure very strong security of the State of Israel. The Israelis know this, the United States knows this, everyone else, including the Iranians, the Turks, the government in Damascus. This (Israel’s security) is one of the top priorities of Russia.*⁶

Conflicting Russian messages

Contradictory Russian messages were apparently transmitted during a January 27, 2019 meeting between Hassan Amir Abdallahian, senior foreign-policy adviser

to the chairman of the Parliament (Majlis), with Russia's Ambassador in Tehran Levan Dzagharyan. The Russian ambassador said during the meeting that Russia and Iran share common positions and strategies and also intend to expand the cooperation between them.

He continued, "The weak Russia-Iran relationship is a myth. Those in the West raising these issues are enemies of the alliance between the two countries. Those who spread these rumors within Iran are friends of the West. Those criticizing Russia are not interested in the alliance between Iran and Russia, and we know who they are."

He added that the Russian deputy foreign minister and Putin's adviser for Syrian affairs, Sergey Vershinin, regularly visit Iran to discuss Syria "with our ally."⁷

Abdallahian said that Israel (the Zionist regime) "will be the main loser as a result of its warmongering policy in the Middle East and that its military provocations pose a real risk to regional security."

The marriage of convenience may fall apart

The tensions between Iran and Russia about Iran's continued presence and the nature of its activities in Syria are expected to continue and even worsen. For now, both countries are successful in keeping the tensions in a low media profile, but occasionally they rise to the surface, as they did this past week after the air force attack and previous attacks that resulted in many Revolutionary Guard casualties. In recent days, there were also unconfirmed reports of fighting in various areas in Syria between armed forces loyal to Iran (Syrian Army Division 4) and those loyal to Russia.

In the short-medium term, both countries share an interest in shoring up the regime of Bashar Assad. However, the day after stabilizing the regime, the controversies and opposing long-term interests of the two countries will float to the surface. Iran considers Syria another forward base on the front alongside Lebanon for confronting Israel. This could lead to instability and hurt Russian interests in establishing a permanent and stable presence in the Mediterranean region (including Libya).

At this stage, the differences of opinion between Moscow and Tehran about the

nature of Iran's presence in the Syrian arena do not influence bilateral political, economic and military cooperation (weapons procurement) between the two countries. Russia will not join the U.S. sanctions move against Iran and will support the nuclear deal. However, in the long run, the growing tensions and gaps regarding future policy in Syria may break the Iranian-Russian marriage of convenience and erode the current broader and common strategic interests of the two countries in the region and even affect their bilateral relations.

IDF Lt.-Col. (ret.) Michael (Mickey) Segall, an expert on strategic issues with a focus on Iran, terrorism, and the Middle East, is a senior analyst at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and at Alcyon Risk Advisors.

* * *

Notes:

1 <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/83182672>

2 <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/syrien-krieg-verbuendete-von-baschar-al-assad-gehen-aufeinander-los-a-1249835.html>

3 <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/82914166>

4 <http://iswnews.com/10038/>

5 <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2019/01/25/sergei-ryabkov-russian-deputy-foreign-minister-pleitgn-dnt-tsr-vpx.cnn/video/playlists/around-the-world/>

6 <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/russian-diplomat-ryabkov-says-iran-russis-not-allies-in-syria/29733774.html>

7 <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/432360/Israel-will-be-the-main-loser-for-its-warmongering-policies>

Source: <https://www.jns.org/the-rocky-marriage-of-convenience-between-russia-and-iran-in-syria/>

[Disclaimer]