Understanding Iran’s Role in the Syrian Conflict

Edited by Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci
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Introduction

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi

IRAN'S ROLE IN Syria is critical not only to the course of the latter’s five-year civil war, but also to longer-term developments in the wider region, not least because the country’s relations with key players, including Russia, Hizbullah, the Gulf States and the Syrian regime, will inevitably be affected by the outcome of the conflict.

The alliance between the Syrian regime and the Iranian leadership is, on the face of it, puzzling. The former is Arab, Alawite and secular, while Iran is Islamic, Shia and deeply religious. Nevertheless, since the civil war in Syria erupted in March 2011, Iran has been one of the key supporters of the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad, and has maintained significant influence over the evolution of the conflict.

This paper presents the findings of a project designed to establish a better understanding of Tehran’s ultimate ambitions in Syria, its relations with the other state and non-state actors involved in the conflict, and its influence on Damascus and the outcome of the civil war.

A team of staff from RUSI and associate fellows investigated these questions from the perspective of the five main actors in the conflict, including those states from the Gulf region, Russia and non-state groups fighting on the battlefield, and contributed to six chapters which provide a comprehensive assessment of Iran’s involvement in the Syrian conflict and how this is seen by the governments in the region. The findings draw on interviews conducted between November 2015 and April 2016 in London, Moscow, Beirut, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Damascus and Tehran. The emerging conclusions were tested at a private roundtable discussion in London in April 2016 that brought together a range of leading subject matter experts.

The first chapter, ‘The View From Tehran’, explores the evolution and scale of Iran’s participation in the Syrian conflict, identifying those setting the agenda and the objectives driving Iranian foreign policy towards Syria. As one of Assad’s primary supporters, Tehran is working closely with Damascus, as well as with Hizbullah and Russia, to prevent the collapse of the Syrian regime. Key issues examined in this chapter are the nuances in policy emanating from the different decision-making centres in Tehran, as well as what success in Syria would look like for Iran, particularly with regard to its presence on the ground, its relationship with Hizbullah and Shia militias, and the role of the Assad regime and current political institutions in a future Syria.

The five following chapters explore how the other players mentioned above view Iran’s role in the Syrian conflict. Each starts with an assessment of the respective actor’s involvement in the civil war before examining the actor’s view of Iranian policy on Syria and whether Tehran’s ambitions align or conflict with its own.
‘The View From Damascus’ examines how Iran is perceived by various institutions within the Assad regime, including the Syrian army and policy-makers. It assesses Iran’s political, security and economic relationship with Syria, and explores how the different centres of power in Damascus perceive Iran’s influence on the ground, and in the military and economic fields.

‘The View From Russia’ explores the relationship between Moscow and Tehran in relation to Syria, one of the issues that altered most drastically between November 2015 and April 2016, when the research for this project was undertaken. The chapter assesses how Russia’s and Iran’s respective relationships with Damascus differ and to what extent Moscow’s strategic interests in Syria are in alignment with Tehran’s.

The two chapters entitled ‘The Views of Non-State Actors’ and ‘Rebel Groups’ Involvement in Syria’ analyse the positions of Hizbullah fighters from Lebanon and Syrian rebel groups fighting the Assad regime. The main goals of the two chapters are to understand Hizbullah’s ties with Tehran, whether its interests in Syria are the same as Iran’s and whether the rebel groups – in particular, the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat Al-Nusra and Ahrar Al-Sham – have divergent views on Tehran. The chapter also explores how Kurdish armed groups, which occupy a distinctive position in the conflict, view Iran’s involvement. The views of Daesh (also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS) were not included in the research.

‘The View From The Gulf’ examines what strategies the Gulf States have adopted to counter Iran’s projection of power in Syria, particularly in light of Tehran’s support for Shia militia groups. The main goal was to examine how the Gulf perceives Iran’s long-term interests in Syria, in comparison to those of Russia (especially following Moscow’s military intervention in the autumn of 2015), and what this means for a future political settlement to the crisis.

In conclusion, this paper brings together these various perspectives to better identify the nature and extent of Tehran’s relationship with Damascus, and its impact on other key relationships in Syria. Much has changed in Iran’s relationships with the region and with the West since the project began in October 2015. Global energy prices fell consistently throughout the period of research, and remain low, making a significant impact not only on the thinking of the key players identified in this paper, but on the resources they are able to deploy in advancing their interests. Additionally, at the time the project was initiated, Russia was playing a significant, if secondary, role in Syria. With its forceful intervention in autumn 2015, however, it dramatically changed the battlefield and stiffened the resolve and strength of the Assad regime and the Syrian army. This dynamic had an impact on the research, and changed a number of assumptions and relationships on the ground in Syria. This paper aims to capture this changing dynamic, but the sands of the conflict in Syria are continually shifting, making it ever-more challenging to determine the factors which might either facilitate or impede the resolution of the crisis. By examining in turn key players in the Syrian conflict and their respective perceptions of Iran’s role in the war, the paper is intended to offer policy-makers a snapshot of the relationship between Damascus and Tehran, providing some crucial pointers on how to interact with one of the key relationships on the ground in the ongoing Syrian civil war.
I. The View From Tehran

Ali Ansari and Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi

SYRIA HAS LONG been considered an important, if controversial, ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran, having been the only Arab country to have explicitly stood by Iran during the eight years of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88). Its Alawite leadership and important Shia shrines have reinforced the strategic relationship with a measure of ideological sympathy, while, for Tehran, the revolutionary imperative of maintaining a land bridge to Hizbullah in Lebanon has helped to cement the alliance further.

As a consequence, Iran has supported Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad since the first civil uprisings of March 2011, which the Iranian regime defined as a ‘foreign-inspired’ sedition.1 As the Syrian leader faced down his protesters with bombs and bullets, a palpable disquiet emerged among Iranian officials who believed that the ideals of the Iranian revolution would be tainted by too close an association with a regime whose strategic importance to Iran was regarded as, at best, ambivalent and, at worst, detrimental. Ultimately, this concern was silenced by the narrative of the ‘axis of resistance’ developed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the institution that took the lead in policy on Syria, fully endorsed by the Office of the Supreme Leader.2 Arguably, Tehran’s ‘heroic flexibility’ regarding its nuclear capabilities, particularly from 2013, was compensated for with greater ideological rigidity in regional policy, with its support for Syria emblematic of a broader, strategic ‘revolutionary’ imperative.

The handling of the Syria crisis represented the first real example of Iran’s foreign policy being outsourced to the IRGC, which regarded its involvement as a key test of its ability and, crucially, political utility. Emboldened by the presidential victory of Hassan Rouhani in 2013 and the opportunity to reboot Iran’s international and regional relations, officials close to the president began to vocalise their concerns that direct engagement in Syria could prove deleterious to Iran’s financial and ideological capital.3 However, this position faced strong opposition from the IRGC and the Office of the Supreme Leader, and soon subsided under the weight of the official narrative of ‘resistance’, according to which Syria constitutes the front line in the fight against terrorism and takfiri groups (professed Muslims who are considered unbelievers) such as Daesh.4

2. See, for example, IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari’s comments in Fars, ‘Sharayet khub-e jebhe-ye moqavemat dar soorieh/ russiye ba jebhe-ye moqavemat hamahang ast [The Resistance Front is in a Good Position in Syria/Russia is Also at One with the Resistance Front]’, 9 Farvardin 1395/28 March 2016. This narrative extends into the economy of resistance, see Alef, ‘Cheesti eqtesad-e moqavemati [What is the Resistance Economy?]’, 10 Farvardin 1395/29 March 2016.
Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has sought to take back some control over the direction of policy by ‘buying back into it’, trying to turn a strategy which many officials consider misguided into a multilayered, multitacked diplomatic initiative which could facilitate the IRGC agenda without locking Iran into a war whose end is currently unforeseeable. The first stage in achieving this has been to emphasise the collective nature of the decision-making process; even if the IRGC appears to have been the lead decision-maker, the argument is that all elements of the political establishment are invested in the policy. The Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) – Iran’s highest defence and security authority, whose members are drawn from all main governmental institutions of the country – has played a crucial role in presenting a more consensual position. The next stage has been to broaden the debate, framing the conflict in Syria as part of both a wider ideological struggle (driven in part by ethnic and sectarian tensions) and a geopolitical (or structural) competition for power with Saudi Arabia. To overcome public disquiet at the cost of the intervention in Syria at a time when the Iranian economy continues to languish, the Iranian leadership has elevated its leading Quds Force commander, Qasem Soleimani, to the status of celebrity, thus keeping sceptics out of step with popular opinion. This has enabled Iran to increase its presence and political investment in Syria while disarming its domestic critics.

In the early stages of the conflict, Iran limited its involvement to providing technical and financial support to the Syrian regime, mainly delivered via the Quds Force. In late 2012, the force played a crucial role in creating the National Defence Forces (NDF), a Syrian paramilitary organisation assisting the regular army and mustering some 100,000 fighters from various religious sects. Its funding is allegedly supervised by Iran. Between 2011 and early 2013, as conditions on the ground deteriorated, Iran sent members of its Law Enforcement Force and IRGC Ground Forces to advise Assad and to provide training and logistical support to the Syrian army. By late 2013, Russia had gradually taken over this role, while Iran had increased its presence on the ground.

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5. See a biography of the current Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, based on interviews in which he speaks about the need for and utility of ‘multiple narratives’; Mohammad Mehdi Raji, Aqa-ye Safir: Goftegou ba Mohammad-Javad Zarif, Safir-e Pishin-e Iran dar Sazeman-e Melal-e Mottahed [Mr. Ambassador: A Conversation with Mohammad-Javad Zarif, Iran’s Former Ambassador to the United Nations] (Tehran: Nashre Ney, 2013).
12. Ibid.
Until April 2016, the total number of IRGC and Iranian paramilitary personnel operating in Syria was estimated at between 6,500 and 9,200.\textsuperscript{13}

When it became clear that there were insufficient Syrian forces to fight rebel groups, Iran also facilitated the deployment of foreign Shia militias, starting with its closest ally, Hizbullah, which first took part in combat in Syria in 2012.\textsuperscript{14} It also provided Iraqi Shia groups (Kata’ib Al-Imam Ali in particular) with training and weapons,\textsuperscript{15} and recruited Shia fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan, respectively constituting the Fatemiyon and the Zaynabiyun Brigades – all answering to IRGC Commander General Mohammad Ali Jafari.\textsuperscript{16} Recruits’ salaries of between $500 and $1,000 a month are paid in Syria directly by Iran.\textsuperscript{17} In April 2016, Iran despatched its regular army (special) forces to Syria. These troops are widely regarded as among the best in the regular armed forces and their arrival may indicate Iran’s desire to compensate for the drawdown of Russian forces, announced in March, as well as to further broaden the involvement of various Iranian institutions.\textsuperscript{18}

Iran is believed to have supplied Syrian government forces and Shia militias with light arms and advanced strategic weapons, including rockets, rocket launchers, Kalashnikov rifles, anti-tank missiles and ammunition.\textsuperscript{19} It has also collected intelligence about rebel groups and, more recently, used drones to conduct strikes against these groups near Aleppo.\textsuperscript{20} Iranian-led forces have predominantly operated in the provinces of Aleppo, Latakia, Homs, Hama, Idlib and Tartus under the control of senior commanders appointed directly by Jafari.\textsuperscript{21}

Iran discusses and co-ordinates all strategic and operational issues with Assad’s government, but has no influence over the personnel of the Syrian army, including their promotion or demotion.\textsuperscript{22} Tehran seems to have declined to have a say in this matter to avoid exacerbating
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Concerns about its direct interference held by generals and commanders of the Syrian army, who had objected to Iran’s role in the creation of the NDF.23

Iran also co-ordinates its actions on the ground with Russia at the ministerial and operational level, although the perception in Tehran is that the Syrian regime prioritises information sharing with Moscow.24 The Iranian leadership has explicitly stated that there is no difference between the strategies of Moscow and Tehran in relation to Syria. However, Russia’s decision partially to withdraw from Syria was not communicated to Iranian officials, increasing suspicions in Tehran that Moscow’s strategic goals in Syria diverge from, and in some cases clash with, those of Iran.25 Iranian officials seem particularly concerned that Russia might be using Syria as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the US on other issues, such as Ukraine, and is therefore not as committed as Tehran to keeping Assad in power nor to preserving the integrity of the country.26

Iran’s Strategic Goals in Syria

Since 2014, Iran has been endorsing a political settlement to the Syrian crisis based on four points, updated in August 2015.27 It has called for: an immediate ceasefire; followed by constitutional reforms to safeguard Syrian minorities; free and internationally supervised elections; and the formation of a national unity government based on new constitutional institutions.28 While, since late 2015, Tehran has openly stated its desire to find a diplomatic solution to the Syrian crisis, it also has maintained a heavy presence on the ground (see Appendix).

In light of Iran’s investment in materiel, men and ideological capital, and especially by the IRGC, in Syria, it is increasingly important for the domestic political audience, if nothing else, that Iran crafts a credible narrative of success. Only then can any form of disengagement be considered.

For Iran, three outcomes would be required for its policy on Syria to be considered a success:

1. The Defeat of Daesh and Jabhat Al-Nusra

Particularly since the rise of Daesh, Iran has portrayed its involvement in Syria as part of a wider effort to fight terrorism and extremism in the Middle East. For Iranian officials, Al-Nusra also constitutes a terrorist organisation, and Tehran has concentrated military efforts on attacking it to demine an area. Interviews with senior Iranian officials, November 2015 and February 2016.

23. See Chapter II, ‘The View From Damascus’.
25. Interview with a professor in international affairs, Tehran, April 2016.
and Daesh equally. According to statements by Iranian officials over the past six months, it will continue to do so. Iran perceives consolidation of the positions held by Daesh and Al-Nusra as a direct threat to the stability of Iraq and, thus, an imminent security concern. Unlike Russia, Iran does not regard Ahrar Al-Sham as a priority threat or immediate target in relation to Syria.

So, while supporting negotiations to find a solution to the Syrian crisis, Iran also appears to be committed to continuing operations on the ground against Daesh and Al-Nusra ‘until the whole of Syria is cleaned from both groups’. So in the short term, Iran is likely to resist any attempts to involve these groups in negotiations about the future of Syria and, despite ceasefires, will continue to strike against them as well as against other rebel groups. In the long term, even if a political settlement is reached, Iran might use the residual presence of Daesh and Al-Nusra in Syria to justify maintaining its own presence on the ground, particularly by continuing to oversee the NDF and Shia militia groups.

2. The Restoration of the Status Quo Ante

Iranian officials claim that Iran’s goal is to restore the status quo ante in Syria. This primarily means that Iran still supports the territorial integrity of Syria and wants to avoid the ‘Lebanonisation’ of the country – that is, its partition into rival areas and quasi-independent regions. While Iranian activity in Syria does not always appear consistent with Tehran’s overall objective of reverting to a centralised state, particularly given the strong presence of militias and parastate entities on the ground, this seems to be driven by a desire to have a ‘Plan B’ in place should it prove impossible to restore the status quo ante.

In the words of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif: ‘Changing borders will only make the situation worse. That will be the beginning – if you believe [in religious texts] – of Armageddon’. Iran believes that only through maintaining Syrian territorial integrity and re-establishing a centralised government will it be able to achieve its strategic goal of maintaining a land bridge with Lebanon, which it needs in order to supply Hizbullah with arms for its resistance against Israel. Iran also wants to ensure that Syria does not become a platform from which the Lebanese Shia movement could be attacked.

31. Interviews with a professor in international affairs and an Iranian official, Tehran, April 2016.
33. Interviews with senior Iranian officials, February 2016.
37. Interview with an Iranian official, Tehran, April 2016.
Iran’s position is also linked to fears of the establishment of Kurdish independence in northern Syria. While Iran does not consider the Kurds a terrorist group, it does not consider them an ally either, given their views on the future prospects of the Assad regime. In this regard, it sees the Kurdish group in Syria as ‘a useful force in the fight against Daesh which, however, does not have the same long-term interests in Syria’. In March, Iran joined Turkey in rejecting the local Kurdish administration’s declaration of a federal structure in northern Syria, stating: ‘They want to divide Syria.’ Iran’s stance on the Kurds in Syria and a possible federal post-conflict Syria seems to be the main point of disagreement with Russia, particularly since March. Moscow has been described as ‘more pro-Kurdish, without consideration for the consequences’, while Tehran worries that greater autonomy for Syrian Kurds might trigger the establishment of independent Kurdish states in Turkey, Iraq and, ultimately, Iran.

3. The Preservation of State Institutions

Iran’s aim is to preserve Syria’s institutions, including the army and the intelligence services, because the implosion of the regime could facilitate the ‘ascendance of an alliance of Sunni extremist groups that are anti-Shia, anti-Iran and anti-Hizbullah’. In the eyes of the Iranian leadership, institutional stability is possible only if Assad remains in power, and talk of disengagement has been quietened until some sort of stability for the regime can be assured. Until three years ago, Iran was open to replacing Assad, according to senior Iranian officials interviewed in Iran and London; however, it now believes there is no viable alternative acceptable to the different constituencies within the Syrian regime, and that institutions would collapse as a result. While Iranian officials claim in private that they would be open to the presidency being assumed by someone from the Ba’ath Party, in particular its current deputy head, Hilal Hilal, or assistant secretary, Mohammed Saeed Bekheitan, they also believe the preservation of state institutions could not be guaranteed in this eventuality.

So, while Tehran has publicly stated that ‘a decision about the future of Syria must be taken by the Syrian nation’, it is clear that it would prefer for Assad to remain in power (in line with Moscow’s preferences, as discussed in Chapter III). A senior adviser to the Supreme Leader stated that Iran also ‘believes that the government of Bashar al-Assad should remain in power until the end of his presidency term and the removal of Assad is a red line for [Tehran].’ This stance is also linked to concerns in Tehran that a new figure would not have the same personal

38. Interview with a senior Iranian official, November 2015.
40. Interviews with a professor in international affairs and an Iranian official, Tehran, April 2016.
41. Randa Slim, ‘Is Iran Overstretched in Syria?’, Foreign Policy, 17 April 2015.
42. Interview with a senior Iranian official, Tehran, April 2016.
43. Ibid.
44. Interviews with senior Iranian officials, November 2015.
relations with the Iranian regime as Assad or, worse, that they would be influenced by Saudi Arabia. Tehran also maintains that Assad must be allowed to stand in any elections during a transition process, and that, given his popularity, he is likely to prevail.

While working towards its preferred outcome in Syria, Iran is also preparing for a scenario in which the status quo ante is not restored and the regime collapses. To this end, Tehran continues to focus on strengthening its ‘deep state’ in Syria, particularly in the south, aiming to establish control over strategically valuable, predominantly Shia regions of Syria through its support of non-state actors, in the hope that it will be able to continue to pursue its vital interests and exert pressure on the government, whoever is in power. This strategy is one of the reasons for tensions between Iran and the Syrian army. It has also prompted the Gulf States to intensify their support for Sunni rebel groups.

47. Interviews with senior Iranian officials, February 2016, and with a professor in international affairs, Tehran, April 2016.
48. See Chapter II, ‘The View From Damascus’, and Chapter VI, ‘The View From the Gulf’.
II. The View From Damascus

Kamal Alam

Damascus was the last Arab capital to be caught up in the popular uprisings that began in Tunis in December 2010. This was primarily because Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad was a popular leader (especially in comparison with his counterparts in other Arab countries) and one whose government and army included all faiths and classes. After succeeding his father as president in 2000, Assad slowly brought in young, Western-educated technocrats, while the military that his father had built relied on broad-based support from the Sunni centres of Homs and Hama, with leading generals who were Druze and Christian. However, the uprising that started with protests in Daraa, in southern Syria, turned deadly in March 2011 when the Syrian Arab Army tried to prevent what it perceived to be an attempt at externally driven regime change.

Five years on, this view continues to prevail, with the Syrian government maintaining that the uprising was the result of interference by Turkey, the Gulf States and some Western countries aimed at replacing Assad with a more compliant, Western-friendly leader. Since 2011, the crisis has claimed 200,000 lives and created a serious refugee crisis, with millions of Syrians fleeing the country. Yet the Syrian government, with the support of its primary allies, Russia and Iran, remains determined to resist regime change. The government is keen to re-establish control over all Syria’s large cities, but at the same time the government and security forces have sought to benefit from negotiations with the international community and those groups involved in the conflict. Indeed, the government regards the Vienna peace process as a way of both legitimising its position and undermining the legitimacy of the rebel groups, by pointing to the ‘real’ opposition in Damascus – disarmed fighters who are non-Ba’athists – who hold seats in parliament and several cabinet offices, including the key Ministry of Reconciliation.

To maintain the upper hand in the conflict, the Syrian army and intelligence service have employed the same tactics that they used in the Lebanese civil war and in Iraq after 2003. During the Lebanese civil war, the Syrian military, under an Arab League mandate and with the approval of the US, intervened to stop the massacre of Christians by various sectarian militias. What began as a small intervention lasted for 30 years, during which Syria engaged in a range of partnerships, moving from befriending the Christians to an alliance with Palestinian groups, to backing the Druze and helping the Shia Amal movement. It maintained a practical hold over all of central, northern and eastern Lebanon from where it could counter the Israeli military in the south. Similarly, in Iraq after 2003, the Syrians supported the Sunni groups fighting the Shia brigades backed by Tehran. This allowed the Syrian intelligence agencies to keep a careful

eye on those Syrians returning from Iraq who might seek to cause domestic unrest, with some individuals imprisoned upon their return and others used to infiltrate militias in Iraq. In Syria today, the regime has sought influence over, or an alliance with, every insurgent group, enabling it, for example, to use the Syrian Kurds to counter Turkish interference in the north of the country, despite relations between them being less than optimal. As the war has dragged on, the Syrian regime has used local truces and ceasefires to survive, and has come to an accommodation with various insurgent groups in the country.\textsuperscript{4}

One key relationship for Damascus in its conduct of the civil war so far has been with Tehran. In the five years of civil war, Iran has been one of Syria’s most constant allies. However, the relationship is complex, drawing support and scepticism from across the political spectrum in Damascus.

An Uneasy Collaboration

Syria has not, historically, been a natural ally of Iran’s.\textsuperscript{5} Before the 1970s, the leading Shia clerics of Iran and Iraq considered the Alawites of the Mediterranean coast to be heretics.\textsuperscript{6} However, when Iraq under President Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980, Damascus was the only Arab capital that did not support Iraq, either militarily or ideologically.\textsuperscript{7} The Syrian Ba’athists had long since split from their Iraqi counterparts as Baghdad and Damascus battled for influence in the region and the dream of Arab unity finally faded with the death of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970. Throughout the eight-year Iran–Iraq War, Syria provided Iran with diplomatic support through Libya, Algeria and Oman, all of which opposed Saddam in his conflict with Iran. It also allowed the Iranian air force to use Syrian airspace, logistics and counter-intelligence capabilities,\textsuperscript{8} while the Syrian army trained Iranian army recruits and allowed Lebanese rebels to train Iranian soldiers in guerrilla warfare in southern Lebanon, traditionally an area of strong Syrian influence.\textsuperscript{9} The Syrian army was never entirely at ease with the manner by which Iran consequently gained a foothold in southern Lebanon, against Syrian wishes.\textsuperscript{10} However, by the end of the Iran–Iraq War, Syria had earned the gratitude of the Iranian clergy, military and people. This did not stop Syria from adopting geopolitical tactics which would enable it to gain control of parts of Iraq, despite the fact that this would not be to Iran’s advantage. For its part, Iran understood that parts of Iraq were likely to remain under Syrian influence, despite its opposition to the radical Sunni groups and the former Ba’athist officers from Saddam’s army who could have posed a threat to Syrian stability. Even more recently, in 2003, Syria and Iran disagreed about the formation of the Iraqi government following the

\textsuperscript{4} Al Jazeera, ‘Syria Rebels Leave Homs Following Rare Ceasefire Deal’, 10 December 2015.
\textsuperscript{5} Leon T Goldsmith, Cycle of Fear: Syria’s Alawites in War and Peace (London: Hurst, 2015), pp. 122–23.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., p. 122.
\textsuperscript{7} The primary reason for this was the decade-long animosity between the Iraqi Ba’ath Party and the Syrian Ba’ath Party, compounded by the tussle between Damascus and Baghdad for regional superiority.
\textsuperscript{8} Jubin M Goodarzi, Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East (London: IB Tauris, 2007), pp. xiii, 45.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., p. 4.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., pp. 143–53.
collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime, with Iran favouring a sectarian government and the Syrian intelligence agencies favouring a balanced Cabinet that included those ex-Ba’athists who were then openly seeking asylum in Damascus. In short, even as allies, Damascus and Tehran have not enjoyed an easy relationship.

Today, after five years of civil war, the Syrian elite remains divided on the question of Iran. While Iran is in many ways a trusted friend, shoring up the resilience of the Syrian army and enabling the survival of the regime, it is also perceived as having played a key role in the fracturing of the Syrian state and the creation of a parallel security state.

Assad and the Syrian government have been careful not to give Iran too much credit, in public at least, for its role in bolstering the regime during the war – not least because the secular nature of Syria and its institutions is a source of pride for the regime. Furthermore, Iran’s presence in Syria makes it difficult for Damascus to maintain the narrative that it is not Tehran’s stooge and that it is free from the influence of Tehran’s mullahs. Iran is seen in some quarters of Damascus as becoming too powerful in Syria, with its proxy force challenging the regime’s sovereignty and calling into question the capacity of the Syrian army. As a result, the government in Damascus says very little in public about Iran’s military involvement, apart from expressing gratitude for the latter’s role in the war against terrorism in Syria, with Iran’s support depicted as part of an anti-imperialist fight rather than a war against the Saudis or Sunni Arab states.

The Syrian regime has also highlighted the support provided by Arab allies such as Egypt and Algeria in order to present a narrative of unity between Arab countries and Iran in pursuit of stability and in fighting terrorism, to counter the often-cited narrative of a Shia alliance between Syria and Iran.

From the military perspective, the Syrian army does not consider Iran to be a key player, while, until recently, Iran described its personnel in Syria as volunteers, creating a veneer of unaccountability for these ‘volunteer’s’ actions. Iran’s formal deployment of forces to Latakia and Aleppo in April 2016, together with its public admission of heavy losses in the weeks that followed, was interpreted by the Syrian regime and its army as a new willingness on Iran’s part to acknowledge its commitment to the conflict in public. While this military support is valued, many within the Syrian regime and army perceive Iran to be driven more by its desire

to control territory near the holy shrines and the areas where Hizbullah operates than by its wish to support the regime itself. Many mid- and high-ranking Syrian officials, while careful not to criticise Iran’s involvement in the civil war, disapprove of being seen as puppets of Tehran. For example, there are many in the Syrian military who believe that Iran was behind the bomb attack in Damascus in July 2012 that killed two of Syria’s most decorated army generals, Hasan Turkmani and Daoud Rajha, with some speculating that it was Tehran’s intention to increase the Syrian regime’s reliance on Iran in relation to security matters. This interpretation seems especially attractive given that the attack came just a few months after the last behind-the-scenes meeting between those Turkish and Syrian officials who were trying to find a political solution to the government crackdown on protesters.17 In one attack, it is argued, the Iranians sought to displace Turkey as a long-time key interlocutor and to prevent the development of an even closer relationship between Damascus and Ankara. Regardless of the reality, this example exposes a lack of trust of Iran on the part of many senior officers in the Syrian army.

Military collaboration between the Syrian army and Iran’s forces is also hampered by cultural differences. With most of Syria’s officer corps schooled in Russia or the former Soviet bloc countries, the Syrian military’s secular and multi-ethnic nature differs greatly from that of Iran, which uses religion to motivate its cadre. The Iranian-backed militias, often seen attending prayers in Damascus,18 are perceived by the Syrian government as deeply sectarian and, in some cases, proselytising to the more secular Syrian army. These militias portray their involvement in the conflict as a fight for the holy shrines rather than the Assad regime, reinforcing this perception, and their relationship with the regular Syrian army can be tense as a result. It has also been suggested that by justifying its combat role in Syria through such an overtly sectarian narrative, Iran risks casting the Syrian government as nothing more than a stooge of Tehran and part of the ‘Shia Crescent’, rather than as a sovereign Arab country, a narrative that would turn Iran’s presence into a liability for the Syrian president.19

Meanwhile, footage obtained by the BBC in 2013 confirmed the dismissive view held by most Iranian security officials about Syrians and the operations carried out by Iranian fighters on behalf of the Syrian government.20 As at the political level, therefore, although there is collaboration between the Syrian and Iranian forces, and possibly limited mutual respect, there remains institutionalised wariness within the Syrian army officer corps about its Iranian counterpart.

A telling, if anecdotal, sign of the lack of popular support for Iranian military involvement in Syria’s civil war is the lack of mementoes available for sale. Unlike in parts of southern Lebanon and Iraq, where shops sell mementoes celebrating the battlefield successes of Iranian Quds Force commander, Qasem Soleimani, in Damascus, there is little evidence of such hero worship.

Despite considerable evidence that Iranian supplies reach the Syrian military on a regular basis, there is a widespread view to the contrary that Iran does not supply the Syrian army with the weaponry it needs and that it simply constitutes just one of the army’s suppliers. In contrast, Russian involvement is welcomed, both in the theatre of war and on the streets of Damascus, where it is easy to find mementos of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian flags being sold.

In economic terms, Damascus has also prioritised its relationships with countries other than Iran. This continues a pattern that started before the war, when Syria was charting a clear path away from Iran towards a more balanced, integrated approach to regional relationships – contrary to the ‘Tehran–Damascus Axis’. During the 1980s, Syria used its strategic location to leverage aid from Iran in return, and with Iran itself cut off from much of the Arab world, Syria provided a way for the Islamic Republic to trade indirectly with the rest of the Arab League. Syria performed a similar function during the Lebanese civil war, using the black economy of Lebanon to its advantage and thereby providing Iran with much-needed strategic economic depth in Lebanon. However, as the Iran–Iraq War subsided and the Lebanese civil war slowed down, bilateral trade between Iran and Syria did not stabilise and develop as might have been expected. Instead, Syria used its new role with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to attract foreign investment from the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. From 2010, Iran represented a relatively small part of Syria’s imports and exports: exports to Iran were worth only $15 million, in comparison to $2.3 billion to Iraq and $12.3 billion in total. Before the conflict started, the EU was the source of 25 per cent of the total $17 billion imports into Syria, with Iran accounting for just $300 million. The recent inroads made by Iran into the Syrian economy seem to consist more of credit lines and loans, rather than trade. In particular, Iranian credit lines and oil sales to Syria have increased considerably since the start of the conflict. Iran’s economic influence in Syria seems to be based more on a ‘war lords’ economy than on trade ties, with various power centres previously linked to the conflict in Lebanon now doing business with Iran. However, the Iranian embassy’s trade attaché in Damascus is also promoting Syrian business in Iran and, while exact figures are difficult to obtain, there is strong anecdotal evidence about the bilateral trade and economic relationship between Iran and Syria, although recent reports suggest that

23. Goodarzi, Syria and Iran, pp. 84–86.
26. Ibid.
financial transactions with the Syrian regime from Iran have contracted.29 Iran seems to be concentrating more on the military than the economic front and direct trade, at least at the state-to-state level, is down to a bare minimum of commodities.

Increasingly isolated following the unravelling of the alliance with Turkey, the Syrian government is short on options. Damascus can now count only on Iran and Russia, which limits the possibility of reducing Tehran’s influence in Syria in both the short and long term. While there might be caution in Damascus over what Iran wants for the future of Syria in practical and ideological terms, the government knows that Iran needs to preserve its regional link with Lebanon – and despite setting up parallel structures, it is likely that Iran will need to rely on Syria to do so in the long term. Since the 1980s, Syria’s relationship with Iran has been rooted in strategic geopolitics rather than ideological interests, and Damascus believes that Tehran is committed to Assad and the security infrastructure which it views as vital to its strategic interests in Syria. Iran’s goal remains to ensure its influence over Lebanon and Iraq indefinitely, and it regards Syria as the vital bridge to both.

III. The View From Moscow

Sarah Lain and Igor Sutyagin

Russia’s current support for the Syrian government is rooted in a long history of co-operation. The Soviet Union’s first arms deal with a Middle Eastern government was with Syria in 1954. Russia has had access to the Syrian port of Tartus since 1971. Former Syrian leader Hafez Al-Assad, President Bashar Al-Assad’s father, studied at a military flying school in the Soviet Union. In the 1980s, Russia covertly sent troops to support the Syrian government during the Lebanese war, and close relations continued after the collapse of the Soviet Union, translating into loans and arms deals.

Russia has consistently played an important diplomatic role in the current Syrian conflict. The most prominent example was the Russia–US brokered deal for the destruction of the Syrian government’s chemical weapons programme in 2013. Russia was already providing training and equipment to the Syrian army before it intervened directly with military force on 30 September 2015 in support of the government, whose stability was highly precarious at the time.

The current military support provided by Russia to Syria includes jets, bombers, helicopters and tanks, as well as pilots from the Russian Air Force, technical advisers and specialists, members of the Russian special forces and tank drivers. Russia was forced to send additional advisers to Syria due to its initial disappointment in the capacity of Syrian and Iranian forces, but it has so far refrained from officially sending ground troops. One expert said that Russia ‘rejects the idea of ground operations, but keeps it in mind’, indicating that, if Russia viewed the risk as worthwhile, it might consider putting combat boots on the ground. There are also Russian

4. Although Russia intervened in late 2015, it was allegedly making plans for military involvement as early as the spring of that year. By the beginning of September, Putin had allegedly prepared the request to the Federation Council for a military campaign abroad. Interview with journalist, Moscow, December 2015.
5. Interview with a military specialist, Moscow, December 2015.
6. Interview with a military journalist, Moscow, December 2015.
private security companies operating in Syria.\textsuperscript{7} It is unclear who has hired these companies, but it is possible that the Syrian government is the official contractor. Since its direct military intervention last year, Russia has continued to maintain a central diplomatic role, overseeing ceasefire deals in February and May 2016 with the US and offering to monitor them from its Khmeimim airbase near Latakia.\textsuperscript{8}

In March 2016, to the surprise of the international community, President Putin announced that Russia was withdrawing the ‘main part’ of its military forces from Syria, saying that the ‘task put before the defence ministry and Russian armed forces has, on the whole, been fulfilled’.\textsuperscript{9} This resulted in the departure of some of its fixed-wing strike force from the Khmeimim airbase and the return of equipment and personnel to Russia. In reality, this was not a full Russian military withdrawal from the conflict,\textsuperscript{10} and there were reports of an increase in supplies of materiel to Syria by Russia. Moreover, Putin’s announcement of a withdrawal was quickly followed by Deputy Defence Minister Nikolay Pankov’s declaration that Russia would continue air strikes.\textsuperscript{11} Russia went on to assist the Syrian army in retaking Palmyra from Daesh, and there were rumours that Russia had subsequently set up a new forward operating base there.\textsuperscript{12}

Russia has provided crucial support to Iran, Hizbullah and the Syrian government in order to maintain Assad’s position as head of state. All sides agree on the need to prevent the collapse of the government, with each external power also interested in protecting their own interests in Syria. However, there are signs of divergence between Russia and Iran regarding Syria’s future, which this chapter seeks to address.

**Russia’s View of Iran’s Involvement in the Syria Conflict**

Russia was in some ways forced to ally itself with Iran to bolster Assad’s position and to achieve its objectives of maintaining military access to the Mediterranean, preserving its influence over Syria, and re-establishing its influence in the wider region and international arena. The central, binding feature of the relationship between Moscow and Tehran is their shared competition


\textsuperscript{9} Denis Dyomkin and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, ‘Putin Says Russians to Start Withdrawing From Syria, As Peace Talks Resume’, Reuters, 15 March 2016.


with the US and frustration at the US’s dominance in setting the rules of the world order.\textsuperscript{13} Moscow views its relationship with Tehran more as a marriage of convenience than a strategic alliance,\textsuperscript{14} characterised by a high level of suspicion and mistrust between the two sides. As one Russian analyst noted, there is the belief that Iran cannot be trusted as ‘they are lying [in terms of their policy and goals] even more than we are!’\textsuperscript{15} There have been signs of this mistrust in the context of the two countries’ long-term goals in Syria.

Despite this mistrust, there appears to be co-ordination between Iran and Russia at the ministerial and military levels, although the foreign ministries of both countries seem to be playing a subordinate role to the military.\textsuperscript{16} This is mostly due to the fact that Russia and Iran are mutually dependent on the ground: Iran cannot conduct an effective ground campaign without the cover of Russian airstrikes; and for Russia to be effective in bolstering Assad’s hold on power, it needs ground troops from Syria and Iran. In September 2015, high-ranking Iranian military officials reportedly attended the Russian Tsentr-2015 military exercises in central Russia,\textsuperscript{17} although there is no documented evidence for this. Although these exercises simulated an attack on Central Asia, they acted as a rehearsal for some of the co-ordinated actions underway in Syria.

Co-ordination between Iran and Russia is partly conducted through the Syrian forces and partly via the intelligence-sharing centre in Baghdad, which is run by personnel from Russia, Syria, Iran and Iraq.\textsuperscript{18} Tehran has given Moscow permission to use Iranian airspace for the transit of strike forces en route to Syria, demonstrating one area of effective co-operation.\textsuperscript{19} However, relations have been defined by operational challenges, such as the lack of a common language and differences in chains of command, as well as by Russia’s disappointment in the capacity and organisation of Iranian forces.\textsuperscript{20} As an example, Russia has repeatedly had to send ground forces, such as artillery elements, to provide fire support to Syrian forces\textsuperscript{21} – a role that was

\textsuperscript{13} Interview with an academic specialist, Moscow, December 2015.
\textsuperscript{14} Interviews with think-tank analysts and academic expert, Moscow, December 2015.
\textsuperscript{15} Conversation with a senior Russian academic, London, 11 November 2015.
\textsuperscript{16} Interview with an academic specialist, London, February 2016.
\textsuperscript{17} Interview with a military expert, London, February 2016.
\textsuperscript{18} Interview with a foreign diplomat, Moscow, December 2015.
\textsuperscript{19} For example, in October 2015 Russia launched cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea into Syria.
\textsuperscript{20} Interview with a foreign diplomat, Moscow, December 2015.
\textsuperscript{21} On 17 November 2015, the Russian Ministry of Defence itself revealed during a briefing broadcast by RT and other Russian TV channels the deployment of one howitzer battery of the 120th Guards Artillery Brigade in support of Syrian troops deployed far from the Russian bases near Khamrat. The footage of this briefing has since been removed by RT from its website, but it is still available on YouTube, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RS2w1zzLrmg>, accessed 22 July 2016. See also ‘Minoboron RF pokazalo kartu razmescheniya rossiyskoy artillerii v Sirii [Russian Ministry of Defence Revealed the Map Showing the Deployment of Russian Artillery in Syria]’, \textit{TSN}, 18 November 2015, <http://ru.tsn.ua/svit/minoborony-rf-pokazalo-kartu-razmescheniya-rossiyskoy-artillerii-v-sirii-S27839.html>, accessed 22 July 2016. On numerous occasions media reports mentioned the use of Russian artillery in combat in support of Damascus’s troops, see, for example, ‘SMI: sirijskie voyska nastupayut pri podderzhke rossiyskoy artillerii [Media: Syrian Troops Advance “With the Support of Russian Artillery”]’, \textit{Voënnoe obozrenie [Military Survey]}, 5 September 2015, <https://topwar.ru/page,1,2,81926-smi-sirijskie-voyska-nastupayut_pri-podderzhke-rossiyskoy-artillerii.html>, accessed 22 July 2016. In addition to the 120th Guards,
supposed to be fulfilled by Iranian troops. The Kremlin has tried to avoid intervention on the ground, and this demonstrates a point of tension in its relationship with Tehran.

Furthermore, it appears that Moscow and Tehran do not discuss all strategic decisions. Russia’s decision to initiate air strikes in Syria, while not influenced by Iran, was most likely co-ordinated during the visit of Quds Force commander General Qasem Soleimani to Moscow in July 2015. In contrast, it seems that Russia did not consult Iran on its ‘withdrawal’ from Syria in March 2016, leading to speculation that there are rifts in the relationship, despite both sides wanting to present a united front comparable to that of the US-led coalition.

The desire to present a united front meant that it was challenging to gain definitive insights in Moscow on how its views on, and vision for, Syria might diverge from those of Tehran. Looking at the broader picture, however, Russian analysts doubt that Moscow and Tehran will try to develop their co-operation into something durable, and many anticipate a worsening of Russian–Iranian relations. There are several sources of these potential tensions.

Do Russia’s Objectives in Syria Align with Iran’s?

Syria symbolises different things in the strategic calculations of Moscow and Tehran: preservation of Assad’s regime is a goal in itself for Iran, while for Russia, settlement of the Syrian conflict is just one part of a much larger objective of re-establishing Russia as an indispensable, major player in the international arena. In particular, Russia’s actions in Syria are aimed at protecting its strategic interests and influence in the region. Without a foothold facilitated by the Syrian government, Russia’s relevance in the Middle East would diminish, as it would lose its only ally in the region that hosts a Russian naval base. Moscow regards its long-term basing rights at the facilities under its control (the Tartus naval base and the Khmeimim airbase) as a way to increase its influence in the Middle East. Russia has made progress on this, signing a deal in August 2015 that guarantees it unlimited and unrestricted use of the Khmeimim airbase.

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23. See Chapter I, ‘The View From Tehran’.


Moscow also views its military role in the conflict as a way of guaranteeing that it not only maintains influence over but becomes indispensable to decision-making on Syria’s future. Russia is seeking to be a ‘rule-setter’ – like the US. It wants to counter the Western-led approach of supporting regime change in a destabilised Middle Eastern country, and avoid a situation developing in Syria that is similar to that in Iraq and Libya. Putin would rather see a political settlement taking shape after ensuring that state institutions remain intact. In this way, Russia hopes to avoid a repeat of the Libya situation in 2011, when Russia agreed not to veto the UN Security Council Resolution (1973) authorising member states to take ‘all necessary measures’ to protect civilians in Libya, only to see the Western-led military intervention lead to the downfall of Muammar Qadhafi’s regime – and subsequently to civil war and instability in Libya.

The Future of President Al-Assad

Russia and Iran both believe that the immediate and wholesale removal of Assad would lead to the collapse of state institutions, causing greater instability. However, in Moscow’s view, Iran is committed to keeping Assad in place, for both political and commercial reasons.26 By contrast, although Moscow wants a Russia-friendly regime in Syria, it is more flexible on what form this might take. Furthermore, it also has to take into consideration its goal of formulating a greater diplomatic role as mediator in the wider Middle East, where many of its interlocutors since its entry into the conflict – including Jordan, Egypt, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia – are vehemently opposed to the Assad regime.27 As a result, Russian analysts view Tehran as the uncompromising actor, presenting obstacles to the resolution of the conflict in Syria on terms that meet Russia’s needs.28

In terms of a political transition, Russia’s view is, in principle, in line with Iran’s four-point plan for Syria (see Chapter I, ‘The View From Tehran’). However, while the UN mandate is seen as crucial for the legitimacy of the process, there is lack of clarity in Moscow about how political transition might happen. The prospect that the Syrian people might decide their own future through elections is regarded with scepticism in Moscow, in part because there is ‘too much hatred’, whereas outside forces are viewed as likely to play a crucial role in the institutional design of the new government.29

26. Interviews with an academic and a think-tank analyst, Moscow, December 2015; interview with an academic specialist, London, February 2016. According to those interviewed, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani ‘burnt political capital’ on the JCPOA on Iran’s nuclear capabilities – agreed with the US, the UK, France, Germany, Russia, China and the EU in July 2015 – and might be reluctant to try and gain further ground with hardliners on issues such as Syria. Furthermore, Iran is interested in maintaining the Memorandum of Understanding signed with the Syrian regime in July 2012, agreeing in principle a plan to build a gas pipeline from Iran across Iraq to Syria, in a project valued at approximately $10 billion.

27. President Putin has had five telephone conversations with the King Salman of Saudi Arabia since Russia intervened in Syria on 30 September 2015; in November, they also met on the sidelines of the G20 summit. Following Saudi Arabia’s decision to break diplomatic ties with Iran, Russia offered to serve as an intermediary to help resolve the dispute; see AFP, ‘Russia Offers to Act as Saudi Arabia, Iran “Intermediary”’, 4 January 2016.

28. Interviews with an academic and a think-tank analyst, Moscow, December 2015.

29. Interview with a think-tank analyst, Moscow, December 2015.
Analysts have suggested that Russia’s ‘withdrawal’ was partly a way of pressuring Assad to be constructive at the Geneva peace talks, particularly as he had explicitly rejected any prospect of stepping down.\(^{30}\) Russia seemingly wished to progress talks towards the formation of a transitional government. This highlights a difference in the way that Moscow and Tehran view Assad’s future, as Alexander Shumilin, director of the Center for the Analysis of Middle East Conflicts at the Russian Academy of Sciences, has stated: any power-sharing government ‘will eventually mean Assad’s exit’.\(^{31}\) This is at odds with Iran’s interests in Syria, which rest on Assad staying in power. (There was also speculation – and some alarm – in Iran that Russia’s ‘withdrawal’ was part of a deal between Moscow and Washington over Assad’s future.\(^{32}\))

Russia appears determined to act on its belief that Assad should eventually be replaced following the end of the civil war. In March 2016, shortly after a US- and Russia-brokered ceasefire had been agreed, Assad announced that elections would be held the following month. In response, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova stressed that Moscow would ‘vigorously’ insist that elections take place with the consent of the opposition and the government after the adoption of a new constitution, thereby sending a warning to Assad.\(^{33}\)

However, not one of those interviewed in Moscow for this project could suggest a suitable successor to Assad. According to one Russian analyst, Moscow would be open to a technocrat acceptable to all parties and would advocate significant limits on the power of any new leader.\(^{34}\) It is alleged that last year, Assad ignored a Russian request to step aside following the visit of intelligence official Colonel General Igor Sergun to Damascus in December 2015.\(^{35}\) While this may indicate that Russia had a successor in mind, no further information has been forthcoming.

### Possible Federalisation

The second issue on which tensions recently emerged with Iran is the possible federalisation of Syria, with which Russia might be comfortable should the central state institutions be preserved.\(^{36}\) After a fragile ceasefire was implemented in February, Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov suggested that Syria become a federal state.\(^{37}\) This might have influenced Moscow’s demonstration of support for the Kurds in northern Syria over the past

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34. Interview with a think-tank analyst, Moscow, December 2015.
36. Interviews with an academic and a think-tank analyst, Moscow, December 2015.
The Russian Ministry of Defence also claimed in May that the Russian military was receiving reconnaissance information from the Kurdish forces. This has again created tensions with Iran, which rejects a ‘Lebanonisation’ of Syria and is concerned about the prospect of Kurdish independence and of its repercussion across the region.

### Hizbullah and Russian–Israeli Relations

The alliance of Iran and Syria with the Lebanese group Hizbullah, which has been crucial to Russian–Syrian–Iranian operations, represents another potential layer of complexity in the relationship between Moscow and Tehran. In November 2015, Russian media reported that a team of eighteen Syrian special forces personnel and Hizbullah fighters, directed by Quds Force commander General Soleimani, rescued the Russian pilot of a Su-24 plane shot down by Turkey earlier that month. The credibility of this story is questionable, but it does show that Russia is not seeking to distance itself publicly from Hizbullah’s important role in the conflict. Indeed, unlike many Western countries, Russia does not view Hizbullah as a terrorist organisation but as a legitimate player in Lebanese politics. In an interview with the Russian press in July 2015, one of the leaders of Hizbullah, Sheikh Naim Qassem, said that Russia and Hizbullah shared the same view of the Syria conflict and had become closer due to Russia’s distancing from the West. This is clearly useful in PR terms in presenting a strong Russia–Iran alliance, united in pursuit of a common aim; but more importantly, Moscow does not seem particularly uncomfortable joining forces with Hizbullah.

However, Russia must take Israel’s security concerns into account. One source spoken to in Moscow said Russia was aware of the tensions that would beset its relationship with Israel should Russian weapons end up in Hizbullah hands. Russia has been quick to assure Israel that it has not given weapons to Hizbullah, and there were rumours that Russia had suspended

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40. See Chapter I, ‘The View From Tehran’.
44. Interview with a foreign diplomat, Moscow, December 2015.
its deal to supply Iran with S-300 surface-to-air missiles when it became clear that Tehran had provided Russian weaponry to Hizbullah,\(^{46}\) although this was followed by reports that Russia had nevertheless started delivering the system to Iran in April 2016.\(^{47}\) Despite fighting on the same side as Hizbullah, Russia also allows Israel to conduct air strikes periodically on Hizbullah, and Russia and Israel have worked together to deconflict airspace. So, while Russia’s relationship with Israel demonstrates diplomatic and military pragmatism, it also increases Iran’s mistrust, particularly over the future of Syria, where the two countries seem to envision a different role for the group.

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IV. The Views of Non-State Actors

Shashank Joshi

HIZBULLAH, THE ARMED group that Iran helped to establish in the 1980s and which now acts as a major political force in Lebanon, first intervened in Syria in 2012, alongside the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and regular Syrian regime units.1 In so doing, Hizbullah aimed to reinforce the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad against an intensifying rebellion, prevent the loss of Iranian supply lines into Syria, and – over time – reduce the threat to Lebanon from Syria-based jihadist organisations.

Hizbullah's approach to Syria should be placed in the context of a shifting Lebanese political balance, largely in the group's favour. Hizbullah's favourability ratings in Lebanon improved modestly from 38 per cent in 2011 to 41 per cent in 2014.2 In Shia neighbourhoods of southern Beirut polled in 2014, 95 per cent of respondents said they supported Hizbullah's involvement in Syria; among Lebanese Shia nationally, polled in 2015, the figure was 78.7 per cent.3 Meanwhile, Hizbullah's Lebanese political opponents – under the rubric of the Saudi-backed March 14 Alliance – are in disarray and, particularly following Saudi Arabia’s cancellation of a $3 billion grant in February 2016, have lacked strong leaders and foreign financial and diplomatic support. Lebanon is ruled by a neutral prime minister heading a national unity government split between the March 14 Alliance and their Hizbullah-led rivals, the March 8 Alliance. The government is frequently stalemated and the arrangement obscures the disproportionate influence of Hizbullah, which has long been considered more powerful than the non-partisan Lebanese armed forces.4 Since the Syrian civil war began in March 2011, Hizbullah has also sought to consolidate its control over Lebanese security agencies. This was particularly evident

with regard to the International Security Forces, which had been seen as a March 14 bastion until its director was forced from office in 2013.\(^5\)

Despite this progress by Hizbullah in Lebanon’s political arena, the scale of its deployments in Syria, against fellow Arabs, has caused discontent among the group’s rank and file, not least because of the gap between its rhetoric of protecting Syrian Shia shrines and the reality of fighting rebels well beyond those sacred sites.\(^6\) Hizbullah’s inability to give combatants in Syria the same generous welfare packages it offered those who fought Israel in 2006 has further angered members.\(^7\) Interviewees noted that some fighters had refused to return to Syria.\(^8\) There is also widespread anecdotal evidence of Hizbullah’s loss of regional prestige. It is clear that the group’s regional standing, bolstered in 2006 because of its relative success against Israel on the battlefield, has been badly hit.

However, there are few indications that Hizbullah has faltered in mobilising the requisite numbers of fighters within Lebanon, and there is some evidence that the group has successfully recruited Sunnis, many of whom are better placed to conduct forward reconnaissance in rebel-held parts of Syria.\(^9\) Moreover, intensified jihadist activity within Lebanon – particularly a series of bombings in Beirut – has lent support to Hizbullah’s claim that its presence in Syria represents a legitimate and necessary forward defence of Lebanon, including through the interdiction and severance of jihadist supply lines into Syria.

In 2014, the group was estimated to have several thousand fighters in Syria,\(^10\) constituting roughly 8 per cent of its total manpower (4,000\(^11\) fighters out of 50,000\(^12\)) or a much larger proportion of active-duty personnel.\(^13\) Public sources suggest that at least 865 Hizbullah fighters

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7. Interview with a former diplomat, Beirut, February 2016.
8. Interview with an analyst, Beirut, February 2016.
11. \textit{Ibid.}
were killed in Syria between September 2012 and February 2016,\textsuperscript{14} while Israeli intelligence estimates suggest a much higher casualty rate of 1,300–1,500 killed and 5,000 injured.\textsuperscript{15}

Between 2012 and 2016, Hizbullah’s intervention in Syria has taken four principal forms: training for regular Syrian forces and irregular Syrian and foreign militia forces; combat advisory roles; combat participation; and a separate and more focused effort to build up capability to strike Israel from southern Syria.

While Hizbullah’s operations were initially focused on areas near the Lebanese border or supply lines into Lebanon, such as at Al-Qusayr between April and June 2013 and at Qalamoun between May and June 2014, their footprint widened such that they played an important role in battles in northern Syria in 2015–16, including in Russian-backed offensives around Aleppo in early 2016. More recently, Hizbullah has also been active on Lebanon’s southern front, fighting mainstream and extremist rebel groups alongside regular Syrian forces. It won significant victories with the recapture of Sheikh Maskin in January 2016 and gateways to Daraa the following month.\textsuperscript{16}

Hizbullah is more capable than the Syrian armed forces and possibly the single most effective ground force in Syria in proportion to its size, although it should be noted that its involvement was not enough to prevent steady regime losses in 2015 until Russian intercession. Hizbullah is likely to have improved its military capabilities through its three-year involvement in Syria, and particularly through co-operation with Russia in larger-scale offensives involving air–ground co-ordination, advanced signals intelligence and electronic warfare, and the operation of any Russian weapons platforms that may be in its possession.\textsuperscript{17} Hizbullah has worked with Russia before, reportedly receiving intelligence from a Syrian–Russian listening post in Syria and Russian anti-tank weapons via Syria during the 2006 war with Israel.\textsuperscript{18} Hizbullah also appears to have integrated reasonably well into Russian-led operations, even participating in the ‘recovery’ of a Russian pilot shot down by Turkey in November 2015.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Interview with analysts, Beirut, February 2016.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ze‘ev Schiff, ‘Hezbollah Received Intel From Russian-Syrian Listening Post During War’, Haaretz, 3 October 2006; Ze‘ev Schiff, ‘Hezbollah Anti-tank Fire Causing Most IDF Casualties in Lebanon’, Haaretz, 6 August 2006.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Interview with journalists, Beirut, February 2016.
\end{itemize}
Hizbullah, Iran and the Syrian Crisis

Iran’s role in creating, arming, financing, using and fighting alongside Hizbullah is well documented, and Hizbullah’s approach to the Syrian conflict should not be understood as being independent of Iran’s. Both pro- and anti-Hizbullah interlocutors interviewed in Lebanon expressed the view that Hizbullah was more usefully understood as an appendage of the revolutionary aspect of the Iranian regime, a view that accords with the published literature. Moreover, Iran’s own interests in Syria are in large part defined in terms of preserving supply lines to Hizbullah, ensuring its survival. Given this symbiosis, Iranian and Hizbullah approaches to Syrian political transition and similar issues are likely to be convergent. Hizbullah’s secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, visited Tehran in 2013 to discuss the Syrian situation with Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, and he has made numerous public statements on Syria in the intervening three years, all of them consonant with Iranian policy.

This suggests that Hizbullah’s absence from the Vienna peace talks is unlikely to be an obstacle to a broader settlement. In effect, Iran – which is a member of the International Syria Support Group – represents Hizbullah, and the latter is likely to abide by terms to which Iran agrees. Iran’s influence over Hizbullah, tantamount to control, was evident in the twin local truces brokered by Iran and Turkey in August 2015, under which rebels were allowed to withdraw from besieged Zabadani in exchange for the lifting of a rebel siege on two Shia-majority villages in Idlib.

Political events within Iran might be seen as signalling a change in the relationship between Tehran and Hizbullah. Recent press reports, for example, suggest that Iran has delayed the provision of 10 per cent – $100 million – of its annual funding to Hizbullah on the grounds that President Hassan Rouhani has encouraged its allocation to domestic projects within Iran. If such reports are accurate, the large-scale defeat for Iranian hardliners (the Iranian constituency most favourable to Hizbullah) in elections for parliament and the Assembly of Experts in February 2016 is only likely to deepen Rouhani’s mandate for pragmatic co-operation with the West, and may over the longer term have a negative impact on the relationship between Iran and

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Hizbullah. However, there is little evidence of concern on Hizbullah’s part; its greater anxiety appears to be one shared by Iran: the risk that Russia will permit – and, in the eyes of some, facilitate – further Israeli air strikes on weaponry controlled by or bound for Hizbullah.24

Furthermore, at least one interviewee mentioned that Hizbullah had been trying to deepen its links to the Lebanese economy, creating a cushion to reduce reliance on external sources25 – likely to be particularly important as the US intensifies international legal and diplomatic pressure to curtail the group’s financial activities.26 A December 2015 speech by Nasrallah, one day after Israel’s assassination of a Hizbullah leader associated with activities in Syria, dealt largely with the issue of US-led sanctions, demonstrating the importance that the group attaches to this financial pressure.27 In June 2016, the Blom Bank in Beirut was subject to a bomb attack, which, in the context of tension between Hizbullah and the Lebanese financial sector, was widely interpreted as a warning to Lebanese authorities.28

Russia’s direct military intervention in Syria in late 2015 has wider implications for Iran’s role in Syria. It has strengthened Moscow’s influence over Damascus at Tehran’s expense, and so made Iran and Iran-backed forces – Hizbullah and other Shia militia forged in Syria – more dependent on Russian priorities, such as where to allocate airpower for offensives or whether and how much to pressure the regime over the Vienna process and associated diplomacy. This dynamic persists despite Russia’s drawdown in 2016. Russia benefits from Hizbullah ground forces, but has little stake in Hizbullah’s overall position in Lebanon or Syria and, therefore, has different priorities for a political transition. One example of this is Russia’s approach to pro-regime, Iran-backed militias in Syria: Moscow pressured Assad’s regime to consolidate the disparate armed groups under Syrian state control, which would have diluted Iran’s influence over the battlefield and given it less post-war leverage.29 Russia’s efforts were largely unsuccessful, although – as discussed in Chapter III, ‘The View From Moscow’ – it has strengthened its grip on regular Syrian forces. By contrast, Iran is more likely to focus on ensuring that the local implications of a broader settlement are favourable to Hizbullah (and thus favourable to Iran), which may include the negotiation of localised agreements such as that at Zabadani, which are conducive to the securing of supply lines.

24. Interview with a diplomat, Moscow, December 2016; interview with a journalist, Beirut, March 2016.
25. Interview with an analyst, Beirut, March 2016. For corroborating analysis of Hizbullah’s economic diversification, see Levitt, Hezbollah.
Hizbullah’s Objectives in Syria

There was consensus among Lebanese interlocutors that Hizbullah’s involvement in Lebanon’s southern front should be understood as part of a broader effort – one that precedes the Syrian war – to establish a more enduring presence in the Golan Heights (parts of which were occupied by Israel in 1967 and annexed in 1981) and, in doing so, stretch Hizbullah’s front with Israel across borders, ‘from Naqoura to the Golan’, as one analyst put it.\(^\text{30}\)

These efforts involve deepening ties with Druze communities in regime-held areas of southern Syria. Iran’s presumed support for this campaign was glimpsed in January 2015, when an Iranian general was killed alongside a senior Hizbullah operative in an Israeli air strike near Quneitra. In December 2015, Israel killed another senior Hizbullah operative, Samir Kuntar, a Lebanese Druze, who had taken on responsibility for this effort.\(^\text{31}\)

Hizbullah’s ambitions in southern Syria have two consequences. First, they represent an attempt to alter the status quo, in which both Israel and Hizbullah are mutually deterred by the damage that could be inflicted by the other in another war. Israeli officials have declared the Golan a ‘red line’ and supported this with the aforementioned assassinations. Israel has largely welcomed Russia’s role in Syria as inhibiting Iran and Hizbullah (as set out in Chapter III, ‘The View From Moscow’). However, should Russian airpower support a broader offensive by the Syrian regime, Iran and Hizbullah in the south, towards the Golan Heights, then Hizbullah may enjoy greater protection from Israeli air strikes, as the Israeli air force would be more cautious of operating in closer proximity to its Russian counterpart and of conducting strikes in proximity to Russian advisers and forward air-controllers on the ground. Thus far, Russian support for southern offensives has been relatively modest.\(^\text{32}\) However, its facilitation of success in the north may aid the regime in expanding its control in the south, which would in turn create new opportunities for Hizbullah, and provoke continued Israeli responses.

Second, a long-term Hizbullah presence in southern Syria is likely to have an impact on the broader political process. Saudi Arabia, other Gulf States and Turkey have all hardened their long-standing opposition to Hizbullah in recent years, and all are likely to take particular issue with any settlement that permits Hizbullah to maintain not just supply lines through a post-transition Syria but, more egregiously, a physical presence in an Arab state. Jordan, some of whose officials even view Syrian regular forces in southern Syria as preferable to extremist rebel factions, will be similarly concerned; it was alarmed by the seizure of Sheikh Maskin near the border in January 2016 by Syrian, Iranian and Hizbullah forces.\(^\text{33}\) Most rebel groups

\(^{33}\) Osama Al-Sharif, ‘Why the Fall of This Syrian City Raises Red Flags in Jordan’, \textit{Al-Monitor}, 8 February 2016.
represented at talks between the Syrian regime and the opposition are also concerned by Hizbullah’s presence.

In practice, any formal provision to exclude Hizbullah from southern Syria is likely to prove unenforceable. Hizbullah will have little difficulty in integrating with regime (or successor government) and Iranian forces in Syria, and is likely to operate covertly and in concert with local Syrian allies rather than as an overt garrison with extensive physical infrastructure. While Iranian officials claim that Hizbullah will return to Lebanon once the perceived threat in neighbouring Syria is addressed (in other words, once the Syrian rebels are defeated or neutralised),\(^{34}\) this should be viewed with scepticism. Among the many convergent aims of Iran and Hizbullah – including the protection of supply lines, Shia shrines and Shia populations, the survival of the Assad regime, and solidarity with allied forces – foremost is the ability to hurt Israel, and the widening of the front with Israel across Syria furthers that objective in important ways. Iran is therefore unlikely to acquiesce to demands that Hizbullah be expelled, once the civil war has come to an end.

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\(^{34}\) Comment by a senior Iranian official, London, 5 February 2016.
V. Rebel Groups’ Involvement in Syria

Hassan Hassan

There are approximately 1,500 different rebel groups in Syria. This chapter explores the views of the main ones – the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Jabhat Al-Nusra and Ahrar Al-Sham in particular – regarding Iran’s foreign policy in Syria.

Despite ongoing peace talks, there is still no coherent coalition of the different political and military groups opposing President Bashar Al-Assad’s regime. In December 2015, Saudi Arabia invited various groups to Riyadh to try to achieve a coalition that could negotiate at the peace talks. The High Negotiations Committee (HNC), led by former Syrian prime minister Riad Hijab, and which now represents the main rebel groups, includes most parts of the FSA, but also other powerful groups such as the Salafist Jaish Al-Islam, based in eastern Ghouta, outside Damascus.¹

The FSA has existed since 2011 and comprises several hundred groups, mostly secular and working loosely together.² Military groups under the FSA are managed by a Supreme Military Council to try to ensure battlefield coherence and cross-provincial communications. However, there is no single, unified political FSA leadership, and its alliances and ideology are strongly shaped by local dynamics, making it difficult to assess how representative are the views or claims of any one group.³ FSA groups have received logistical and military support from a number of Western countries, including the US, as well as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan.⁴ The FSA has been known to co-ordinate with Islamist groups, and even with Al-Nusra, to fight regime or Daesh forces.⁵ Its strength has waned since late 2013 with the rise of powerful Islamist and jihadist groups, such as the Islamic Front, Al-Qa’ida’s Al-Nusra and

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¹ Syrian parties invited included the political groups of the National Coalition, the National Coordination Body and the Building the Syrian State Movement. Ahrar Al-Sham attended but withdrew, due to its opposition to the strong representation of the National Coalition in the HNC, see Aron Lund, ‘Riyadh, Rumelan, and Damascus: All You Need to Know About Syria’s Opposition Conferences’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 9 December 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriancrisis/?fa=62239>, accessed 22 July 2016.

² It is difficult to determine the strength of FSA forces due to their fragmented nature, but estimates range from 4,000 to 60,000 soldiers.


⁴ The Guardian, ‘Who Backs Whom In The Syrian Conflict’, 2 December 2015; Frank Gardner, ‘Gulf Arabs “Stepping Up” Arms Supplies to Syrian Rebels’, BBC News, 8 October 2015. The US has provided anti-tank missiles to vetted ‘moderate’ groups, with 500 anti-tank missiles recently sent to the FSA. However, the supply of weapons has been limited due to fears of these weapons falling into extremist hands.

Daesh. Many of its members deserted and joined Islamist groups, which are perceived as more influential, powerful, better armed and less corrupt.6

In 2013, the Islamic Front consisted of various Sunni Islamist groups, the largest of which were Ahrar Al-Sham and Jaish Al-Islam. Despite the coalition’s claims to fight for all Syrian people against tyranny, it is opposed to Alawites and Shia on a sectarian basis.7 The group weakened and fractured after fighting Daesh, the Assad regime and, occasionally, FSA factions in late 2013 and early 2014.8 One of the main factions of the coalition, known as Suqour Al-Sham, completely vanished after one of its main groups defected to Daesh, and other members joined other groups or were killed in the fighting.

In late 2013, intra-rebel polarisation and the rise of Al-Nusra and Daesh led many of those Islamist groups to emphasise religious or sectarian rhetoric. Jaish Al-Islam’s former leader, Zahran Alloush, then made calls for Syria to be rid of all Shia and Alawites, and the group, which receives funding from Saudi Arabia and Qatar, has imprisoned Alawite civilians to deter air strikes by the regime and its supporters.

Islamist groups are generally aiming to overthrow the Assad regime in order to establish a ‘religion of the state, [as] the principal and only source of legislation’.9 However, after the Riyadh conference in December 2015, all groups declared a commitment to ‘a democratic mechanism through a pluralistic system that represents all segments of the Syrian people, men and women, without discrimination or exclusion on a religious, sectarian or ethnic basis’.10 In April 2016, Russia called on the UN to add Ahrar Al-Sham and Jaish Al-Islam to a blacklist that already includes Al-Nusra and Daesh due to their affiliations with them.11 Such a move may push the groups closer to Al-Nusra, which appears to have good relations with most Islamist groups, strengthened by the common cause against Assad and the group’s effectiveness against government forces. Indeed, in January 2016, Ahrar Al-Sham entered into discussions

on a merger with Al-Nusra, but these fell through because Al-Nusra would not cut ties with Al-Qa’ida. Since 2013, Islamist groups – mostly driven by their regional backers – have made frequent attempts to push Al-Nusra away from Al-Qa’ida.

Given the extent of Iranian involvement in Syria, it seems that all groups are engaged in fighting Iranian troops in some form, be it Quds special forces or Iranian-backed militias. Iranian-backed Hizbullah and Iraqi militias have also spearheaded much of the fighting in northern and southern Syria. A recent video produced by Al-Nusra purportedly shows Iranian special forces retreating from Al-Eis in southern Aleppo. As fighting in Aleppo intensified in February and July, various rebel forces clashed with pro-government forces, which included Iranian operatives and Iranian-backed foreign militias.

How Rebel Groups View Iran’s Policy in Syria

Despite the difficulty opposition groups have had in reaching agreement on a number of issues in relation to the Syrian civil war, there are few differences in views on Iran’s presence in Syria. While FSA factions that include military defectors from the Syrian army tend to be more accepting of a long-term engagement with Iran, most rebel groups see Iran as a strategic and sectarian enemy. While the possibility that any group will ultimately engage with Iran cannot be ruled out, Iran’s involvement in the peace process is currently rejected by all opposition forces.

Iran presents two main threats to opposition groups. First, its direct military support of the Assad regime, aimed at preserving his presidency, directly counters the objectives of rebel groups, which all seek to replace the regime in some way. Iran’s involvement in battlefield successes not only weakens opposition groups, but gives Assad a stronger position from which to negotiate at peace talks. Second, Iran’s involvement in Syria is perceived by rebel groups as part of its support for Shia across the region and an attempt to spread Shia influence. For example, Ahrar Al-Sham has pushed the sectarian rhetoric that Iran’s involvement in Syria is part of a regional ‘Shia sickle’. The group has demanded ‘the complete cleansing of the Russian-Iranian occupation of Syrian land, and the sectarian militias which support it’, and with 40 other Islamist groups, called for co-operation to counter the ‘Russian-Iranian alliance occupying Syria’.

13. On 28 July 2016, the group announced its split from Al-Qa’ida and its new name, Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham. This might have an impact on a potential merger with Ahrar Al-Sham or other rebel groups.
18. Lund, ‘Riyadh, Rumelan, and Damascus’.
19. Sylvia Westall, ‘Syrian Rebels Call for Regional Alliance Against Russia and Iran’, Reuters, 5 October 2015.
Rebel groups seem largely united in seeing Iran as the second main threat on the ground after Assad, particularly since 2013, when Iran spearheaded the regime’s bloody crackdown as the Syrian army started to weaken. FSA officials have suggested that, particularly in the past six months, rebel groups view their primary military engagement as being with Iranian forces. This might be because rebel groups view Iranian militias and Hizbullah as having de-facto control of the Syrian army, in contradiction to how other actors involved in the conflict perceive Iran.

Rebel groups generally view Russia, with Iran, as a supporter of the regime. Until the Russian military intervention in September 2015, the opposition viewed Moscow’s role as mainly political in vetoing any UN Security Council resolutions that condemned or incriminated the Syrian government. Some opposition figures, including former chief of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, Moaz Al-Khatib, had hoped that Moscow would play a more constructive role than Tehran in resolving the conflict. FSA commanders have also indicated that Russia and Iran, despite their support for the Assad regime, could help to balance Western influence in Syria in the future.

Tensions between rebel groups and Russia came to a head when Moscow announced its intervention last year. The FSA rejected Russia’s offers for negotiations in October 2015 due to its partnership with Assad, and referred to it as an ‘occupying power’. In January 2016, HNC co-ordinator Hijab dismissed proposals for peace talks as ‘a Russian and Iranian plan’ that would be ‘a disaster for the region’. However, some groups have engaged in negotiations with Russia, highlighting groups’ different perceptions of Moscow.

Many rebel group leaders said that ceasefires with the regime had worked only when they were brokered and supported by third-party countries, such as Iran or Russia, or when Assad was temporarily forced to accept them because of military constraints or due to the rebels’ ability to strike against the regime’s key interests, among other reasons specific to each town. According to the rebels, Iran and Russia are pivotal brokers for effective deals, as the regime typically expects surrender or does not stick to the terms of deals brokered without them. Jaish Al-Islam, for example, had rejected around thirty proposals for a ceasefire made by Damascus, but accepted the first proposal made by Russia in December. This was due to the perception

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23. Interviews with members of the FSA’s joint command in northern Syria, March 2014.
26. Interviews with representatives of the main rebel forces, including Islamist groups, January 2016.
27. Ibid.
that Russia is more credible than the regime in terms of enforcing a deal. Other ceasefires were agreed between the FSA and the Russians at around the same time, such as in Al-Qudsiyah on the outskirts of Damascus, while rebel groups have expressed interest in similar truces agreed under the auspices of Russia.28

Iran, too, is perceived as more credible than the government in Damascus. Tehran has brokered several deals with various opposition forces, notably in Homs in May 2014.29 While the rebels view Iran as the key supporter of the regime, they are often prepared to engage with it, whether through ceasefires or discreet meetings. Opposition sources say that meetings with Iranian officials, including with Islamist groups, have taken place in Beirut and Tehran. Iran has also struck key deals with Islamist forces on behalf of the Assad regime, notably the October 2015 truce in southern and northern Syria between the regime and Hizbullah on the one hand and Jaish Al-Fateh (a coalition of Islamist and jihadist forces, including Al-Nusra and the ultra-conservative Ahrar Al-Sham) on the other. The deal, which covered fourteen towns, including the areas of Zabadani, Foua and Kefraya, involved a ‘population swap’ that moved civilians as well as fighters to territory managed by their own sects in exchange for a local ceasefire.30 This was initially condemned by Jaish Al-Fateh but, by December 2015, there had been transfers of several hundred people.31 Such a decision – an apparent reversal of views by Jaish Al-Fateh – might stem from fading hopes for a military resolution to the conflict, and a move towards redrawing the map of Syria along sectarian lines.32

The deals that Iran has struck with various groups demonstrate a pragmatic engagement. Politically, different opposition factions – possibly including the Muslim Brotherhood, Ahrar Al-Sham and the FSA33 – have indicated publicly or privately that, when the dust settles in Syria, partnership with Russia and Iran is possible. Even Al-Nusra, according to a senior member of the group, does not intend to engage in open confrontation with Tehran, a position that reflects Al-Qa’ida’s longstanding strategy of refraining from operations against Iran.34

The Kurdish View of Tehran’s Role in the Syrian Conflict

Outside the general rebel consensus stand the Syrian Kurdish political parties, mostly based in north and northeast Syria in an area commonly known as Rojava, under the general administration of the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM). The largest Kurdish political party, the
Democratic Union Party (PYD), has sought to promote a federal autonomous zone in Rojava; here, it is seeking distinctly different goals from other opposition groups elsewhere in Syria. Maintaining an uncomfortable system of non-aggression pacts with opposition groups and regime elements, the PYD’s policy is one of pragmatic balancing. Regime elements and pro-regime militias backed by Iran are viewed with extreme distrust by the PYD. However, a ‘cold peace’ broadly governs their interactions. Conflict can erupt, if only infrequently, in areas where PYD governance stands side by side with that of regime forces, such as in the towns of Al-Qamishli and Al-Hasakah. Following such conflagrations, the PYD has been quick to point to the National Defence Forces, backed by Iran, as the cause of the problem.\(^{35}\) Although evidence of direct Iranian interference in Kurdish-controlled areas is scant, all Kurdish political groupings in Rojava are hostile to the notion of any Iranian influence in Kurdish affairs. It is not lost on Syria’s Kurds that, while their push for autonomy in Syria’s failing state is gaining traction, Kurds in Iran continue to struggle against a state that denies them political rights.\(^{36}\) This mistrust deeply colours Kurdish perceptions of Iran’s role in Syria, and partly explains why Syria’s Kurdish parties are almost unanimous in their desire to form self-ruled cantons to shield themselves from interference by Iran, among other external actors, via the Syrian regime. Nevertheless, the contact points between the forces of the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and militias backed by the Syrian regime and Iran are relatively few, although they cannot be said to be friendly in nature.

Ultimately, the majority of Syria’s Kurdish parties seek self-rule in Syria, even if they are pursuing different routes. Should Iran acquiesce to this goal of Kurdish self-rule, relations between the two sides will likely be neutral and Tehran’s interests would not be factored into Kurdish strategies. However, any move by Iran to counter Kurdish political aspirations is likely to be fiercely resisted.

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35. Interview with Alan Semo, PYD representative, UK, 21 April 2016.
VI. The View From The Gulf

Michael Stephens

The role played by the six Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Syria’s five-year war can be described as influential, but not decisive. Deeply hostile to the regime of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and its Iranian allies, the Gulf States – in particular Qatar and now predominantly Saudi Arabia – have sought to build a credible, alternative opposition coalition that would replace the regime and usher in a new system of government that removes any vestiges of Assad’s family from power and rolls back Iran’s presence in the country. Support for the opposition has extended to trying to directly influence the military course of the war, and Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been deeply involved in the supply of arms and logistical support to rebel groups in Syria. This policy was revealed by open source blogger Brown Moses in January 2013, when Islamist rebel groups operating in Daraa, armed with sophisticated anti-tank weapons from the former Yugoslavia, began rapidly to overrun long-held regime positions.1 The weapons had been procured with Saudi money and funnelled to the rebels with the help of Jordanian intelligence networks.2

Historically, at the beginning of the conflict, a de-facto division of labour existed in which Turkey and Qatar ran weapons shipments into Syria across the northern border, while Saudi Arabia and Jordan took responsibility for supplying rebels in the south. The creation of Jaish Al-Fateh – a conglomeration of Islamist groups, including Al-Qa’ida affiliate Jabhat Al-Nusra – in early 2015 was supposed to facilitate a more joined-up approach between Riyadh, Doha and Ankara, although Saudi Arabia has always been something of an outsider to the partnership. Indeed, Riyadh has remained uncomfortable with being too close to those hardline groups supported by Qatar, such as Ahrar Al-Sham, whose links to Al-Qa’ida are a source of great concern to Saudi Arabia’s Western allies.3 Nevertheless, with the oversight of the US, Riyadh has continued to funnel finance and arms to vetted rebel groups, in an attempt to keep the fight against the regime alive and to push back Daesh and Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) forces operating in the area of Rif Aleppo.4

The Saudis have also expended substantial diplomatic capital to bring the fractious and ineffective opposition to a more coherent position. The formation of the High Negotiations Committee (HNC) in December 2015 is perhaps Saudi Arabia’s most impressive achievement to date. Resisting Russia’s attempts to include a number of individuals whom Saudi diplomats termed ‘spoilers’ and ‘trouble makers’,5 the conference enabled a wide range of actors, including

important militia groups such as Ahrar Al-Sham (albeit after some hesitation) and Jaish Al-Islam, to agree on a number of points. With the emergence of former Syrian prime minister Riad Hijab, who had defected in 2012, as the primary representative of the HNC, the opposition also gained a figurehead whose reputation and gravitas enabled him to represent the many political actors and militias in the negotiations.

The result is that ‘most of these groups now feel that Saudi Arabia is the only representative for their concerns in any talks with the regime’. Riyadh’s privileged access to the opposition is perhaps a reflection of Doha’s retreat from the forefront of Syrian opposition politics. Although ‘Qatar still maintains the best contacts to opposition groups operating on the ground’, on matters of multilateral negotiations and politics, Doha and its GCC counterparts largely defer to Riyadh. It is now primarily the responsibility of Saudi Arabia to represent all groups fighting Assad, excluding those of a jihadist nature, with Qatar playing an increasingly minor role. Nevertheless, it has been difficult for the Saudis to leverage their position as primary external backer of the HNC.

Since Moscow began its military intervention in September 2015, the Gulf States have struggled to find a meaningful response. Their inability to provide advanced ground-to-air weapons systems to anti-Assad rebels (aside from the standard Russian-issue SA-7 and SA-18 MANPADS that litter Syria’s battlefields but are of insufficient quality for the task) has left opposition forces with no chance of fighting back against Russian fast jets, and no means through which to turn the tide of battle. Following the decision by Western countries in 2013 not to bomb Syria in response to the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta, the Gulf Arabs know they cannot count on Western military power to act as the backbone of regime change policy. This has led to a recalculation by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – the only Gulf countries with the capacity to deploy large volumes of military hardware overseas for extended periods – that they must do more militarily to protect their interests in the region. Both countries have indicated in recent months that their forces are ready to deploy inside Syria if necessary. Saudi Arabia has established an Islamic military coalition comprised of 34 countries to fight terrorism. Riyadh has also stated openly that it has considered sending ground forces into Syria, while sources interviewed for this chapter confirmed that it possesses the operational capacity to do so. However, details on how Saudi ground forces would operate once in Syria, and with what partners, are absent, and neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE has ever suggested that they would deploy ground troops against any armed force other than Daesh, and certainly not against Russian military assets. At the time of writing, the Saudis have deployed four F-15 fighters and 30 ground staff to Turkey’s Incirlik airbase with the explicit purpose of targeting Daesh. There is no indication that these

6. Interview with Hassan Hassan, Associate Fellow at Chatham House and Non-resident Fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 21 January 2016.
aircraft have yet been used for operations in Syria, and rumours that Saudi special forces are also based at Incirlik and operating in northern Syria are as yet unsubstantiated.

The Reaction of the Gulf States to Iranian Activity

The Gulf States primarily view the war in Syria through the lens of a broader regional opposition to Iranian interference in Arab affairs.\(^1\) Iran’s regional meddling is seen as having foisted sectarianism upon the region, triggering the rise of extremist groups, such as Daesh.\(^2\) With none of the Gulf States sharing a border with Syria, and with these states largely unaffected by geostrategic issues related to the Syrian conflict such as refugee flows and the cross-border infiltration of terrorist organisations, the primary concerns in the Gulf are rolling back Iranian influence from traditional Arab lands in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, and the prevention of Daesh sympathisers and returnees launching attacks. This latter consideration is especially a concern for Saudi Arabia. Indeed, of particular concern to Riyadh is the way Iran empowers non-state actors such as Hizbullah, the Houthis in Yemen or the Shia militias in Iraq, to do its regional bidding.\(^3\) The perception, especially in Riyadh, is that Iranian regional expansionism has gone unchecked by the Gulf States’ traditional allies in the West, and has in fact been empowered by Western engagement with the country over its nuclear programme.\(^4\) The belief in Riyadh, Manama and Abu Dhabi is that the price paid for Iran’s acceptance of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in July 2015 is too high. As a result, the Saudi government feels duty-bound to step in to prevent Iran from throwing its weight around because it does not believe that the Americans or Europeans are willing to do so.

While Iran is primarily seen by the Gulf States as a geostrategic threat and the subject of interstate regional competition, there is little doubt that sectarian politics are also at play in relation to the Syrian conflict. The view of Assad among Gulf States today, as a staunch ally of Iran and advocate of sectarian Shia interests, was not widely held in the first stages of the conflict. It was not until August 2011, when the death toll passed 2,000, that opinions in the Gulf began to harden significantly against the Syrian regime, and the GCC states recalled their ambassadors from the country.\(^5\) However, the sectarian lens through which the Gulf viewed the war was still largely absent until the entry of Hizbullah, particularly during the battle for Al-Qusayr in 2012. The intervention by the Iranian-backed group sparked outrage in the Gulf States, and had a dramatic impact on the political rhetoric used about the conflict. Prominent Sunni clerics in the Gulf began to use more overtly sectarian language to describe the war, with Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi calling Hizbullah ‘Hezb Al-Shaytan’ (the Party of Satan). He further stated ‘The leader of the party of the Satan comes to fight the Sunnis … Every Muslim trained to fight and

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capable of doing that [must] make himself available'. This position was endorsed strongly by the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia and other leading Sunni clerics. Prominent Gulf Arab media outlets also responded, blocking Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah’s speeches from being published or broadcast. In an escalating war of rhetoric, the media both in the West, but especially in the region increasingly framed the conflict in sectarian and anti-Iranian terms. At the time of writing, there is little to suggest that these opinions in the Gulf have changed.

In the absence of serious Western military power to back their vision for a new Syria, the Gulf States have (albeit reluctantly) engaged with Moscow as an alternative player and a potential balancer against Iran. The relationship between the Gulf States and Russia is complex. Russia’s role as a major hydrocarbons exporter with longstanding interests in Syria is respected and understood, and its economic and commercial interests in the Gulf are not viewed with any sense of threat or concern. However, Riyadh and Moscow are currently on opposite sides of the Syria conflict, and — in public at least — Moscow has shown a propensity to push Saudi concerns aside.

However, there are some shared interests between Russia and Saudi Arabia that might lead to a shrinking of Iranian influence in Syria. Riyadh and Moscow both dislike the notion of unidentified, unaccountable militias with clear sectarian affiliations milling about in the Syrian conflict. Although Moscow has used air strikes to target Gulf proxy groups, it is also uncomfortable with the presence of Shia militias operating with free rein across the country. Furthermore, none of the Gulf States are at odds with Moscow over how the Syrian state, or what remains of it, should function. There is a firm belief in Riyadh and Doha that the maintenance of the Syrian state and its institutions would be sufficient to maintain security in the country without the contribution of Hezbollah or the Shia militias – a position not too far from that of Moscow. Abu Dhabi is even closer to the Russian position in this regard. Its dislike for hardline Islamist actors means it shares Moscow’s preference for a secular leadership in Syria, although it would prefer it not to be Assad. According to one Saudi source: ‘We were given assurances by Moscow already that Assad would go.’

Broadly for the GCC, Moscow’s ability to define the military and political space in Syria makes it a more powerful and influential player than Tehran. This dilutes Tehran’s influence in the country, and provides a basis from which the Gulf and Moscow can consider their common

21. Interview with a UAE policy academic, Abu Dhabi, 1 February 2016.
interests at Iran’s expense. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has expended significant political and diplomatic effort in the past year to try to build a better relationship with Russia. The two countries maintained a high level of contact throughout 2015, with Deputy Crown Prince and defence minister Mohammed bin Salman meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin in October 2015 in Sochi, which the King will follow up with a meeting in 2016. They have also agreed (in principle) to a freeze in oil production to help prevent a further decline in the oil price – an agreement that received short shrift from Tehran. Nevertheless, Riyadh, Doha and Abu Dhabi do not possess the means to coerce or persuade the Russians to abandon their support for Assad. The key for Riyadh is to understand more precisely the conditions under which Moscow might accept Assad relinquishing the presidency; it must then consider how far it would be prepared to compromise in order to create these conditions, instead of raising the price of Moscow’s involvement in Syria through continued support for anti-regime proxies.

GCC Objectives in Syria

The Gulf’s two main military powers, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are in a much better position to intervene militarily and politically in Syria against Iran’s proxies than in Iraq. This situation is largely due to the refusal of the Iraqi government to allow Gulf military operations on its soil, which could help rebel groups on the ground, particularly around the town of Azaz and in what is known as the ‘Manbij pocket’. However, there are too many external actors of equivalent or superior power in Syria for Saudi Arabia to dominate the political arena or to be the leading partner in a military coalition, as it is in relation to Yemen. Policy-makers in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi acknowledge that they have to be flexible when dealing with other players in Syria, most notably Russia. However, Saudi Arabia has not shied away from making its red lines clear: Assad must leave power; a negotiated settlement must bring about a united Syria, and the opposition HNC should be represented in government, thereby preventing Syria from operating as a proxy of Iran or returning to a structure that allows the Assad family total control over the apparatus of state. It is a view to which Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar subscribe, although the UAE is less committed to this position than in the past. The worry in Abu Dhabi is that many of the opposition groups in Syria are no better than the system they might replace and, worse, present a threat to the UAE’s own national security. However, the vehemence with which the Saudis have pursued the removal of Assad means that the UAE is unlikely to oppose them on this issue. For Saudi Arabia, the issue of Assad being removed from power has become ‘an issue of pride for us, but we are looking for a face-saving mechanism, which Iran just doesn’t want to offer’.

23. Mohammed Sergie, Grant Smith and Javier Blas, ‘Saudi Arabia and Russia to Freeze Oil Output at Near Record Levels’, Bloomberg, 17 February 2016.
26. Interview with a UAE policy academic, Abu Dhabi, 1 February 2016; interview with a UAE defence academic, Abu Dhabi, 1 February 2016.
27. Interview with a Saudi defence adviser, Riyadh, 26 January 2016.
28. Interview with a Saudi defence adviser, Riyadh, 26 January 2016.
To date, the Saudis have not been able to build diplomatic momentum for the HNC in talks with the regime. Saudi Arabia’s frustration at the regime’s negotiating tactics runs deep, and there is no question that it believes that Assad’s negotiators play for time at every opportunity. By holding firm to the belief that Assad must relinquish power (which the Gulf States argue is an explicit commitment of the Geneva process), Saudi allies are unable to move forward in negotiations. HNC representative Riad Hijab has stated that while Assad’s departure is no longer a precondition, there can be no place for him or other members of the current leadership in the future Syrian government. As the issue is primarily one of ‘saving face’, the longer Assad stays, the more it appears that Iran has ‘won’, a scenario that Riyadh wants to avoid at all costs. Besides the key issue of Assad’s future, Iran’s military presence in Syria, and the expansion of Iranian-backed militias operating outside of state control, is the main focus of Saudi ire. The rollback of Shia militias is therefore a key component in reassuring Saudi Arabia that it has contained Iran’s expansive goals regionally, and that it has not ‘lost face’ in the war. Riyadh will accept nothing less.

In the absence of Iranian flexibility, the Saudis believe ‘that they can get more movement with Moscow than they can by talking to Tehran’. However, the Russian military involvement since September 2015 and the recent gains made by the regime around Aleppo have tipped the balance of the war away from the rebels, and weakened their position at the expense of proxies backed by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. Moscow’s overwhelming military power leaves the Saudis with few options for counter-escalation, and Riyadh has calculated that it does not possess the ability to go head to head with Russia. Thus its recent deployments of four F-15s to Turkey do not signify any meaningful military escalation, as it will make little difference to the balance of hard military power. Assad’s relative security in the military sphere does not mean that Riyadh will simply give up and admit defeat. Nevertheless, the most that Riyadh, and by extension Doha and Ankara, can realistically achieve at this point is the preservation of rebel control over areas in Rif Idlib, the Azaz-Kilis corridor, Ghouta and Rif Daraa. It is unlikely that any meaningful gains against the regime can be made outside these rebel strongholds.

33. Interview with a Western diplomat, Riyadh, 25 January 2016.
34. Interview with a Saudi defence adviser, Riyadh, 26 January 2016.
VII. Conclusions

Raffaello Pantucci and Michael Stephens

The premise of this paper is that Iran was, and will remain, a pivotal actor in the Syrian civil war. While this was borne out during the project, in undertaking the research it became clear that there were numerous other actors with direct and indirect influence over Damascus’s decision-making processes, and that some were as influential as Iran – if not more so. When the project was conceived, Russia was playing a significant but secondary role, but this changed dramatically after its direct military involvement from September 2015. Nonetheless, Iran’s role in Syria continues to be a significant element in political, military and economic terms. This role is depicted in the Appendix, illustrating the escalating nature of Iran’s presence in Syria.

Iran’s involvement in the Syrian conflict is driven by important strategic interests that have grown in significance since 2011, including the preservation of an ally, the retention of supply lines to Hizbullah, and the degradation of jihadist groups, including Daesh. Given these interests, and the pre-eminent role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Iran’s policy on Syria, Iran is likely to maintain its significant involvement in the conflict for the foreseeable future. Hizbullah, fighting alongside Iran since 2012, will also continue to play a key role in making sure that Tehran’s interests are furthered, in part through the group’s pursuit of an enduring presence in southern Syria.

Tehran’s behaviour and objectives played a key role in shaping the views of the Syrian conflict in every capital visited as part of the research project underpinning this paper – and especially so regarding the question of what the end state in Syria would look like. What emerged clearly is that while there is broad consensus on what Tehran seeks in Syria – a non-hostile regime that continues to act as a conduit to Hizbullah, a stable and whole country without pockets of independent Kurdish territory that might encourage greater fragmentation in Iraq, and, although not a priority, the degradation of Daesh – there are significant differences between capitals over how far they are willing to accommodate Iranian objectives.

The purpose of this concluding chapter is to summarise these points of divergence and offer some specific points of entry and engagement for Western policy-makers with regard to Tehran in particular.

Damascus’s Views of Iran and Russia

While the Syrian regime recognises the pivotal role of Iran in preventing its collapse, both militarily and economically, it much prefers Russian support, which is not underpinned by a religious zeal, is less focused on the role of militias, and in many respects demands less politically intrusive control over the regime’s security apparatus. The Syrian regime does not want to end up as a pawn fought over and used by Saudi Arabia and Iran, and it is concerned about the Shia
militia and Hizbullah fighters mobilised – and in some cases directed – by Iran. A number of Syrian interlocutors cited stories of Iranian militias trying to convert secular Syrian forces, with ensuing tensions between the two sides. Damascus and Tehran seem aware of these tensions, but prioritise the goal of regime stability as a focus of their co-operation and co-ordination.

**Iran and Russia**

Similarly, the apparently close relationship between Moscow and Tehran is far more fragile than is often assumed. Neither believes that the other is fighting for the same long-term objectives. Russia’s announcement of its drawdown from Syria in March 2016 may have been directed primarily at a domestic audience, but it took the ally with whom it was fighting on the ground by surprise. Iranian experts and diplomats in many capitals repeatedly expressed concern at Russia’s intentions in Syria. Almost every Iranian interviewee admitted to apprehension that Moscow’s ultimate goal is to change the global geopolitical balance and increase its influence on the international stage. These interviewees argued that Russia sought to use Syria as a bargaining chip to resolve the Ukraine question, at the expense of Iran’s localised interests in Syria. In Tehran, Russia’s policy in Syria is also perceived as a way of controlling Iran’s links to Europe, helping the Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom to continue its dominance of European energy supplies. Whatever the reality of these perceptions, they reflect the level of mistrust between the two countries. Concerns in Russia about Iran seem more closely connected to Moscow’s longer-term aims of maintaining influence in the Middle East while balancing a close relationship with Israel. In this sense, Iran’s activity on the ground and its support for Hizbullah to preserve its long-term territorial influence within Syria presents a headache for the Russian government that requires careful management.

The key point at a geopolitical level is that relations between the two countries are more malleable than they might appear and that, in turn, Iran and Russia have different degrees of influence over Damascus. While Iran and Russia are co-ordinating closely on the ground to advance the war, they are less bound together in terms of their goals, and there is little trust between the two over their respective long-term aims in Syria. Damascus is more comfortable dealing with Russia than the seemingly sectarian agenda of Iran. This offers a point of engagement for Western policy-makers to advance their own interests. Russia is more interested in the extra-regional geopolitical repercussions of its role in Syria, while Iran has more specific interests on the ground that comprise a more significant part of its overall foreign policy. While Russia and Iran both play a strategic role in Syria, and must be part of any talks over its future, Iran is likely to have greater influence in local issues, such as ceasefires and humanitarian access in specific areas, while Russia is likely to have greater interest in broader factors, such as its status or role as guarantor of a settlement.

The goal for Western policy-makers should be to explore ways in which they can work ‘between’ Russia and Iran, by pressing for a settlement that acknowledges the incremental nature of any transition away from President Bashar Al-Assad’s regime in exchange for Russian concessions in areas that may impinge on Iran, such as placing constraints on the role of Iranian-backed forces in a future post-Assad environment. In other words, it may be possible to persuade Russia that
it can gain from a deal in Syria that counters some of the more objectionable elements of Iran’s behaviour – and in turn make the deal easier to sell to those in the Gulf who are supporting the armed opposition groups. While a full consideration of the connection between the Middle East and Europe is beyond the scope of this paper, we recommend that Western policy-makers not be drawn into Russian discussions that seek to associate the situation in Ukraine with any resolution of that in Syria. The two need to be kept separate, as they relate to fundamentally different aspects of European security. However, by engaging with Russia constructively in relation to Syria, in recognition of the country’s influence and achievements on the battlefield, Moscow’s aspiration to be recognised as a major power on the world stage may be met. The existing peace process, particularly since the cessation of hostilities brokered by the US and Russia in February 2016, goes some way towards this end.

Rebel Groups

Our research indicates that armed opposition groups have varying attitudes towards Iran’s present and future role in Syria. Iran has shown that it is able to strike bargains with some of the anti-Assad forces on the ground in pursuit of specific goals. Iran, or Iranian-backed forces, have even been able to make a number of deals with hardline rebel groups to undertake population exchanges or ceasefires. Rebel interlocutors said that they found Tehran, as with other third parties, to be more credible than the Assad regime in such negotiations, suggesting that Iran may be a useful and direct interlocutor on the ground. While it may be unable or unwilling (or both) to compel the Assad regime to change its behaviour, it is able to change realities on the battlefield. This highlights a valuable point of engagement through which to improve the lot of Syrian civilians on the ground.

The Gulf States

The current trajectory of the Syrian conflict is deeply worrying for Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies, but also presents opportunities for these countries. Assad can no longer be forced from power and the military opposition cannot win a decisive victory. The cruel truth for Riyadh and its partners is that, in the absence of Western military backing, they have not been able to escalate the conflict decisively enough to ensure the result in Syria they sought. The Russian intervention has permanently changed the landscape of Syria in a way that reduces Riyadh’s Syrian policy from one of regime change to the preservation of what little political and military opposition remains. The main negotiations between Washington and Moscow have excluded Riyadh, leaving it to tinker at the edges of the conflict, geographically and diplomatically. However, dissuading Saudi Arabia from being a spoiler would require that it see some benefit from a negotiated settlement, both in terms of a degree of political transition in Syria and a moderation of Iranian influence. To reiterate, such moderation is compatible with Russian interests.

Furthermore, while there appears to be a superficial consensus within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and allied countries in opposition to Iranian influence, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) appears considerably more flexible than Saudi Arabia. While the Emiratis follow the broad direction of Saudi foreign policy, they are more wary of Islamist politics in general, whether
Sunni or Shia in nature. This suggests that the UAE would be more flexible about who rules in Damascus when the conflict is over. Additionally, Emirati officials have reservations about Saudi Arabia’s present foreign policy activism, despite their joint involvement in Yemen, which suggests they might be willing to nudge Riyadh in a more compromising direction.

Iran

All of this is taking place at a time when the Iranian government is seeking to open up the country to the world, particularly as the July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is implemented. The Iranian government seeks external investment to support its sanctions-hit economy, but is equally eager to show itself to be a powerful actor in the region. At the same time, while the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is keen to retain control over Iranian policy on Syria, the Iranian government might try to gain more influence in shaping the level of direct engagement in Syria. For the moment, however, while Iran’s influence over Damascus has been diluted by Russian intervention and is also likely to depend on domestic dynamics in Tehran, Iran retains influence, power and connections with respect to Assad’s leadership and parts of Syria’s military. Tehran will, therefore, be a significant actor in any resolution and is likely significantly to affect the extent to which any political deal can be delivered by Damascus. Engaging with Iran has two benefits: it may clarify Tehran’s red lines in relation to Syria; and it may help Iran to feel it has a place at the international table. Iran’s desire for economic engagement should be used as leverage, connecting the UK’s own predisposition to dialogue – including its willingness to intercede with the US over ongoing sanctions-related issues – to Iran’s willingness to use its influence in Damascus. This would be a logical connection, with a more constructive Iranian regional role enabling improved political and economic relations.

Europe

Any unilateral effort by the UK to put pressure on Iran using economic levers would probably be self-defeating at a time when European capitals view Tehran’s economic reintegration as a broadly positive process. Given the pattern of Iran’s economic diplomacy, such pressure can therefore only be applied effectively at a European level or, at least, in a forum that includes France and, ideally, Italy and Germany. European powers, notably the UK and France, are also well placed to engage with the Gulf States to better understand what compromises they might accept – such as the precise future status of Iranian-backed forces in Syria. These understandings can then be used in negotiations with Russia (see Chapter III, ‘The View From Moscow’).

More specifically, different European actors should take the lead in engaging with their Gulf or Iranian counterparts as part of a broader European diplomatic effort. This could be done within the context of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) or by using a contact group involving representation from the major EU member states. A member state such as Italy, which was Iran’s biggest trading partner before sanctions were enacted, and which has been at the forefront of the push to re-engage with Tehran since the signature of the JCPOA in July 2015, could be the face of engagement with Iran, while a power such as the UK could be the face of engagement with the Gulf. To ensure the participation of important European actors such as
Germany and France, the Gulf could be further subdivided to reflect national links and alliances. Such a grouping cannot substitute for the ISSG as a whole, or for US and Russian leadership, but it can supplement the broader diplomatic efforts that are underway.

Naturally, this will be more difficult following the UK’s vote to leave the EU in June 2016, with the consequent anticipation of declining British influence within the bloc and the heightened focus on intra-European diplomacy. However, although the EU faces a number of pressing challenges that may limit its foreign policy capacity, it is able to bring to bear political, economic and diplomatic inducements that are of considerable value to the GCC and Iran. These inducements could include enhanced economic engagement with Iran, enhanced defence engagement with the Gulf States, or commitments to articulate and support Gulf interests in diplomacy regarding Syria.

Although our project did not include trips to European capitals, we recognise that disparate European interests in relation to the Middle East as a whole, and to Syria in particular, may undermine such an effort on the part of the EU. Nevertheless, the interest shared across Europe in reducing migrant flows and creating a less hospitable environment for jihadist groups could be a focus for greater co-operation.

Recommendations

This paper offers the following key recommendations for Western engagement with Iran and for a way forward in Syria. Some of these build on initiatives that are already underway, while others offer areas for further consideration.

1. Engage With Iran

Since the signature of the JCPOA in July 2015, pragmatic elements in Iran’s leadership are seeking to re-emerge on the international stage, in economic and political terms. A key element will be Iran’s involvement in global geopolitical discussions, with due recognition of its role in specific areas. Previous discussions about its nuclear programme have shown that Iran is able to compartmentalise specific issues in its engagement with the West, and it is possible that discussions about Syria might allow for a similar approach. European powers can use Iran’s pursuit of economic engagement as leverage to demand that it use its influence over the Assad regime and groups in specific parts of the battlefield. While these two areas pertain to different factions in the Iranian system, decision-making, supervised by the Supreme Leader, is sufficiently co-ordinated, notably through the Supreme National Security Council, to allow Tehran to consider such trade-offs. Iran is less likely to alter its policy in Syria if it feels European powers will accommodate its economic interests regardless.

2. Focus on Talking With Russia About Damascus

Moscow appears to have more influence in Damascus than does Tehran, and it appears to be more willing to use it. This suggests that Moscow may be more capable of forcing change in the regime and in Syria’s political system as a whole. Russia’s concerns centre on the orderliness of
any transition and the reliability of Western commitments made as part of any settlement. Addressing this concern will require greater dialogue not just on the transition process, as has occurred, but also on the end-state in Syria. Russia is likely to be willing to make compromises that are less favourable to Iran, and this may open the way to solutions that might appeal to Saudi Arabia and its partners.

3. Focus on Finding an Alternative to President Bashar Al-Assad

Neither Iran nor Russia is irredeemably committed to having Assad as the leader of Syria. Iran has at times expressed a clear willingness to accept an alternative to Assad, in addition to its public suggestions that power be devolved from the presidency and dispersed. Iranian interlocutors appeared open-minded about an alternative leader, but demonstrated a preference for a technocrat. While it is clear that putting in place a new leader alone would be insufficient to address Syria’s deep-rooted political problems, and that to accept symbolic change would not assuage the demands of armed opposition groups, a short-term transition would make it easier for anti-Assad actors, notably Saudi Arabia and Turkey, to accept other compromises as part of a ‘face-saving mechanism’, referred to in Chapter VI, ‘The View From The Gulf’.

4. Focus on Iranian Influence on the Battlefield

Russia and Iran are in many ways complementary actors on the ground in Syria. Tehran specifically has greater influence on parts of the battlefield, in particular where Hizbullah and those militias it supports are active. Western powers should seek to take advantage of this to find ways of improving the lot of civilians trapped between rival sides on the battlefield, while also seeking to use Iranian connections to persuade specific groups to implement local ceasefires or to facilitate access to humanitarian aid. In contrast, Iranian support for Hizbullah’s role in southern Syria is likely to contribute to regional tensions and complicate efforts to secure Gulf support for any settlement. While continued access to Hizbullah in Lebanon is likely to be a non-negotiable issue for Tehran, there may be scope for compromise over the status of Hizbullah forces beyond Lebanese borders. Calibrating these differences accurately and seeking ways to engage on specific issues in specific places would be a productive way to engage with Iran on Syria.

5. Understand the Differences Between Gulf Cooperation Council Actors

There is disagreement among GCC states about Iran’s role in Syria and across the region. They disagree over whether the source of the problem is Iran’s leadership or elements therein, and on the desirability of intensified confrontation with Tehran. Through shuttle diplomacy, in particular between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Jordan, it may be possible to increase understanding of these attitudes and find common ground between the Gulf States and Iran in relation to Syria. In particular, the UAE, which is more concerned by Islamist forces and takes a more cautious approach to the region, might nudge Saudi Arabia towards reducing its support for opposition forces as part of a negotiated settlement. While this is unlikely to resolve broader Gulf–Iran tensions, it may offer a way to improve the situation on the battlefield with regard to humanitarian aid or other limited goals. This may, in turn, open up avenues of communication or help to establish points of consensus between the various sides.
Appendix: Timeline of Milestones in Iran’s Engagement in the Syrian Civil War

Prior to the Civil War
- 2,000–3,000 Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officers stationed in Syria.
- Two Iranian shipments of light arms and explosives intercepted in Turkey. Unclear if for regime or Hizbullah.

2011
- January–March
  - Iranian snipers deployed, and Iranian-manufactured tear gas used to repress protests. Law Enforcement Force deployed to assist President Al-Assad.

2012
- April–June
  - Free-trade agreement signed between Iran and Syria.

- July–September
  - Hizbullah began its combat role in Syria.
  - Reports surfaced of military supplies being flown from Iran via Iraq to Syria.

- October–December
  - Quds Force played a crucial role in creating the National Defence Forces.

2013
- January–March
  - $1 billion loaned to Syria for food imports.

- April–June
  - Agreements relating to Iranian investments in Syria’s oil, industrial and energy sectors.

(Continues)
### 2013 (Continued)

**July–September**
- $3.6-billion loan agreed to fund oil imports.
- Iran provided support to Shia militias fighting in Syria.
- Total number of Iranian operatives in Syria estimated to have reached 10,000.

**October–December**
- Evidence suggested Iran had provided Syria with chlorine bombs.
- Hizbullah’s role expanded.
- A ‘security zone’ established in Qalamoun.

### 2014

**January–March**
- Annual trade between Iran and Syria reached $1 billion, up from $300 million in 2010.

**April–June**
- Iranian Falaq-1 and Falaq-2 rocket systems used by the Syrian regime.

**July–September**
- Increase in deployment of Afghan Shia units led by Iran.

### 2015

**April–June**
- Direct maritime shipping lines announced.
- $1-billion loan provided by Iran to offset the drop in value of the Syrian pound.

**October–December**
- After Russia’s military intervention, Iran withdrew some of its forces. Number of those remaining estimated at between 6,500 and 9,200.

### 2016

**January–March**
- 3,000 Iranian army personnel believed to be in Syria.
- No acknowledgement by Tehran of involvement beyond advisory capacities.

**April–June**
- Iranian casualties believed to have reached 700, with the true figure likely much higher.
- Senior Hizbullah commander killed in explosion in Damascus.
About the Authors

**Kamal Alam** is a Research Analyst in International Security Studies at RUSI. His research focuses on Pakistani defence, the relationship between the Pakistani military and the Arab states, the Syrian army and Syrian state affairs, and Syria’s relationship with non-Arab countries in the Middle East.

**Ali Ansari** is Professor of Iranian History and Director of the Institute for Iranian Studies at the University of St Andrews, Senior Associate Fellow at RUSI and President of the British Institute for Persian Studies.

**Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi** is a Research Fellow in International Security Studies at RUSI. Her research is concerned with security in the Middle East, with a particular focus on Tehran’s foreign and domestic politics, as well as EU–Iranian relations and EU sanctions on Iran.

**Shashank Joshi** is a Senior Associate Fellow at RUSI and a doctoral student of International Relations at Harvard University’s Department of Government. He specialises in international security in South Asia and the Middle East.

**Hassan Hassan** is a Resident Fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy in Washington, DC, and Associate Fellow at Chatham House’s Middle East and North Africa Programme in London. His research focuses on Syria, Iraq and the Arab Gulf States as well as Islamist and Salafi groups.

**Sarah Lain** is a Research Fellow in International Security Studies at RUSI. Her research focuses on Russia and the former Soviet Union. She has a particular interest in Central Asia and China’s growing influence in the region.

**Raffaello Pantucci** is the Director of International Security Studies at RUSI. His research focuses on counterterrorism as well as China’s relations with Western states.

**Michael Stephens** is a Research Fellow for Middle East Studies at RUSI and Head of RUSI Qatar. He is a specialist in Qatari foreign policy and Gulf security, Arab Shia identity across the Middle East, as well as Iraqi Kurdistan and the Kurdish regions of Syria.

**Igor Sutyagin** is a Senior Research Fellow in International Security Studies at RUSI. His research is concerned with US–Russian relations, strategic armaments developments and broader nuclear arms control, and anti-ballistic missile defence systems.