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# **Russia and Iran's Complicated Partnership in Syria**



**Yaakov Lappin**



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YAAKOV LAPPIN is an Israeli military correspondent and analyst. He provides coverage for *Jane's Defense Weekly* and the *Jewish News Syndicate*, and is an associate researcher at the *Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies*.

In 2015, Russia formally entered the Syrian conflict, becoming the Assad regime's second sponsor, alongside Iran. The grounds for that intervention, we now know, were laid at a 2015 meeting between Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, and Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.<sup>1</sup> Russia's entry, in turn, marked the start of a complex Iranian approach in Syria – one aimed at utilizing the benefits of Russia's presence while circumventing potential constraints that this presence could place upon its expansionist agenda.

## IRANIAN INVESTMENT, RUSSIAN INTERVENTION

Until Moscow's entrance into the Syrian theater, the Islamic Republic – via its clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), its chief terrorist proxy, Lebanon's Hezbollah, and an assortment of regional Shi'ite militias under Iranian command – was fighting a desperate battle to keep an array of Sunni rebel organizations from overrunning the Assad regime.

The scope of Iran's investment was enormous. As of last year, the Iranian regime was estimated to have spent some \$16 billion in support to the Assad regime.<sup>2</sup> It had likewise deployed an estimated 2,000 military officers to guide pro-Assad forces in combat.<sup>3</sup> And it had mobilized a large contingent of Shi'a irregulars to augment Syrian forces. Estimates of the exact number of Shi'ite

militia members is unknown, with Israel's Ambassador to the UN, Danny Dannon, stating in April 2018 that the number exceeds 80,000.<sup>4</sup> In December 2018, the outgoing Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff, Lt.-Gen. Gadi Eisenkot, stated that Israel had disrupted Iranian plans to mobilize 100,000 Iranian-backed militias in Syria, thereby placing their numbers at below 100,000.<sup>5</sup>

These investments had come at a high cost. Although exact casualty numbers are unknown, by 2016 Iran admitted to sustaining 1,000 casualties as a result of the Syrian civil war, and that number will certainly have risen over the past three years, although Iran does not appear keen to release the latest casualty figures.<sup>6</sup> Iran's chief terrorist proxy, Hezbollah, has likewise been impacted significantly by the conflict. Over the past several years, the group is estimated to have sent some 8,000 fighters to Syria,<sup>7</sup> and sustained some 1,250 casualties to date.<sup>8</sup>

The extent of Iran's involvement eloquently conveys that the Islamic Republic sees Syria as both a defensive and offensive project. It views Syria as a "front line" state whose collapse would invite hardline Sunni Islamist threats to Shi'ite Iran's borders. Syria is also seen as key to Iran's expansionist plans for regional hegemony and power projection – plans that include encircling Israel with heavily armed proxy forces. Iran likewise seeks to destabilize the

moderate Sunni Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, which now faces hostile Iranian-backed forces from two directions: Iraq and Syria.

At the official rhetorical level, Iran has relied heavily on the excuse that it is in Syria at the invitation of the Assad government. In reality, the Assad regime owes its existence to both Iran and Russia, and has little choice but to issue “permits” in response to demands by Iran to use Syrian territory as a base for the creation of offensive military capabilities for future use against Israel.<sup>9</sup>

Russian President Vladimir Putin, for his part, took advantage of the regional vacuum created in part by an increasingly absent U.S. and entered Syria in September 2015. Russia’s strategic goals are manifold, from restoring Moscow’s Soviet-era influence in the Middle East to strengthening and expanding the country’s historic military foothold in the Levant.<sup>10</sup> First and foremost, however, the Kremlin was committed to rescuing the Assad regime – its longtime strategic ally and the guarantor of Russia’s foothold in the country.

When it came, Russia’s intervention – largely in the form of the deployment of aerial squadrons – augmented the Shi’ite Iranian-backed forces already on the ground in the Syrian theater. These deployments proved decisive in turning the tide of the Syrian conflict. This, in turn, marked the first act in a new, complex military and strategic partnership between Moscow and Tehran – one which is enabled by a series of overlapping interests, but is not

free from tensions, distrust or rivalry.

## MOSCOW IN THE MIDDLE

Despite its alignment with Iran, Russia has generally maintained friendly relations with Israel, and struck a relatively neutral posture towards the parallel Israeli–Iranian shadow conflict that has been raging across Syria since at least 2013. That conflict involves a series of mostly low profile Israeli strikes on Iran’s efforts to build up offensive military infrastructure in Syria, and to use the country as a transit zone for smuggling advanced Iranian weaponry to Hezbollah in neighboring Lebanon.<sup>11</sup> Jerusalem’s campaign, dubbed by the Israeli defense establishment as the “war between wars,” is aimed at stopping Syria from becoming a second Iranian forward operating position against Israel, alongside Lebanon.

Within Lebanon, Hezbollah’s arsenal of surface-to-surface firepower now exceeds 120,000 projectiles, posing a major threat to the Israeli homefront.<sup>12</sup> Iran is interested in replicating this scenario in Syria, and turning the country into a new front against Israel, with all that this entails. Israel has launched numerous preventive strikes to thwart this project.<sup>13</sup>

Russia has historically tolerated the Israeli military campaign. Yet in 2018, the Israeli-Iranian conflict escalated significantly, and increasingly drew in the Assad regime, causing alarm in Moscow. That Spring, in a show of increased confidence, Syrian air defense batteries began firing heavily on Israel Air Force

9. Maj.-Gen. (res.) Amos Gilead, speech to the Institute for Policy and Strategy, Herzliya Conference, May 8, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNlUjFkRY>.

10. Stephen Blank, “Beyond Syria: Moscow’s Objectives in the Middle East,” Atlantic Council, April 17, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/beyond-syria-moscow-s-objectives-in-the-middle-east>.

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13. “Israeli jets said to strike Iranian-run missile production facility in Syria,” *The Times of Israel*, July 22, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-jets-said-to-strike-chemical-weapons-site-in-syria/>.

14. Yaakov Lappin, "Half of Syrian Air Defense Destroyed By IAF In Recent Months," Jewish News Syndicate, May 24, 2018, <https://www.jns.org/half-of-syrias-air-defenses-destroyed-by-iaf-in-recent-months/>.

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16. Seth J. Frantzman, "Russia warns of 'provocation' in Syria, hints at Israeli 'hot heads,'" *Jerusalem Post*, November 1, 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Russia-warns-of-provocation-in-Syria-hints-at-Israeli-hot-heads-570846>.

17. "Russia completes delivery of S-300 air defense system to Syria," *The Times of Israel*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/russia-completes-delivery-of-s-300-air-defense-system-to-syria/>.

aircraft. In response, around half of the regime's air defenses were destroyed by IAF jets defending themselves from missile fire.<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, the Israel Defense Forces and the IRGC clashed directly in Syria in May 2018, with Israel destroying over 50 Iranian targets scattered throughout the country. In response, the IRGC fired 32 surface-to-surface rockets at Israel from southern Syria, most of which were intercepted by Israeli air defenses.<sup>15</sup>

Russia's neutrality began to erode throughout these events, after Moscow identified Israel's strikes on Iran's military build-up as a threat to its objective of stabilizing the Assad regime. However, the rupture in Israeli-Russian relations, caused directly by Iran's activities in Syria, turned into a full blown crisis in September 2018, after Iran hid a shipment of missile guidance manufacturing components in a Syrian Armed Forces facility in Latakia, on the Syrian coastline, close to Russia's Khmeimim air force base. The Iranians likely sought to use the proximity of Russian military forces and advanced Russian air defenses as an "insurance policy" against Israeli strikes. But Israel nevertheless struck the target, drawing intense and inaccurate Syrian anti-aircraft fire, resulting in the accidental downing of a Russian intelligence-gathering aircraft on September 17th. This event marked the start of a Russian shift against Israel's freedom of action in Syrian skies – a development that serves Iran's interests well.<sup>16</sup>

## A TILT AWAY FROM ISRAEL

The September 17th IAF strike was a consequence of Iran's attempts to use Russia's military presence in Syria as a cover under which to conduct threatening military activity. It was also a reflection of Iran's successful efforts to drive a wedge between Israel and Russia, despite the latter two having set up a deconfliction mechanism, and their joint, genuine attempts to respect one another's interests in Syria. Iran views the victory of its client regime in Damascus as a major opportunity to consolidate its military presence in Syria, and its actions suggest it sees Russia's military presence as a convenient protective layer against Israeli strikes, under which it can continue its force build-up.

In the wake of the incident, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu issued a series of belligerent statements against Israel, and announced the following month that Russia would deliver four batteries of the S-300 air defense system to the Assad regime.<sup>17</sup> The decision by Russia to arm Assad with advanced surface-to-air missiles, which could be used by Damascus not only to fire on Israeli jets but also to threaten Israeli civilian air traffic, was an indicator that Moscow's formerly neutral posture has shifted visibly to Israel's detriment, and done so without a simultaneous, visible Russian move to rein in Iran.

Behind the scenes, Russia may well be applying pressure on Tehran



to tone down its activities, which are acting as a magnet for Israeli strikes. But developments on the ground suggest that this pressure has been partially effective at best. Indeed, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated in November 2018 that Russia “lacks leverage” to eject Iran from Syria, although he added that Iranian weapons trafficking activities in Syria have decreased “significantly” since the September 17th Russian plane downing incident.<sup>18</sup>

Netanyahu also claimed that Israel’s relations with Russia remain “good,” and proposed an increase in efforts to coordinate Israeli–Russian military activities in Syria. This offer, after months of diplomatic tensions, appears to have been accepted by Russia during Netanyahu’s February visit to Moscow.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, diplomatic contacts between Jerusalem and Washington, while revived to some degree in 2019, are now greatly reduced in comparison to former, more frequent visits by Netanyahu to Russia for meetings with Putin, and reflect the ongoing diplomatic tensions between the two countries.

## AN EMBOLDENED IRAN

In the meantime, the threat to Israel posed by Iran and its terrorist proxies remains a top priority for the Israeli defense establishment. Recent statements by Israeli defense officials appear to confirm that Iran and Hezbollah are continuing in their attempts at a phased build-up in southern Syria, irrespective of any previous agreements with Russia.

“Despite the stabilization of the Syrian

regime, the challenges of the arena remain,” Maj.-Gen. Yoel Strik, the IDF’s outgoing Commanding Officer for the Northern Command, said in November 2018. “We clearly discern attempts by Iran to consolidate itself in many areas in Syria. Iran is attempting to use Syria as a route for the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah, which [itself] is trying to build terrorist infrastructure on the Syrian Golan Heights, near our border, as a second front, alongside southern Lebanon. The IDF will not permit this.”<sup>20</sup>

Strik’s comments suggest that Iran has been able to circumvent Russian attempts to limit its expansion in Syria, and that Russia’s ability to rein in its Iranian partner is in question. At the official level, President Putin has said it is not Russia’s job to push Iran out of Syria – an apparent acknowledgement of Russia’s inability to do so.<sup>21</sup>

These developments collectively sketch out an Iranian policy, spearheaded by IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, of continuing to consolidate power in Syria. While Israel has been highly successful to date in disrupting this policy, Iran looks set to keep trying, while also increasing its efforts to entrench itself in neighboring Iraq and Lebanon.

Iran has embedded its activities in Syrian military sites, knowing that Russia is sensitive to strikes on these targets, and patiently tried to build up assets in southern Syria, based on the awareness that Russia cannot fully stop such activities. Iran’s strategy centers on driving a wedge between

18. (Hebrew) Twitter account of Barak Ravid, Channel 10 diplomatic correspondent, November 19, 2018, <https://twitter.com/barakraavid/status/1064451069575667712>.

19. Itamar Eichner, “Senior Israeli Official: Crisis Over Downing of Russian Plane Behind Us,” *Yediot Ahronot* (Tel Aviv), February 27, 2019, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-5471104.00.html>.

20. Yoav Zeitoun, “Commander of Northern Command: Hezbollah Is trying to build second front against Israel,” *Yediot Ahronot* (Tel Aviv), November 19, 2018, (in Hebrew), <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0.7340.L-5408584.00.html>.

21. Zvi Lev, “Putin: Not our job to get Iran out of Syria,” *Israel National News*, October 18, 2018, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/253463/>



22. Raz Zimmt, "Iranian Responses to Trump's Statement and Initial Assessment of the Statement's Effect on Iranian Policy in Syria," Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, December 26, 2018, <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/iranian-responses-trumps-statement-initial-assessment-statements-effect-iranian-policy-syria-dr-raz-zimmt/>.

23. "Putin Says He Wants All Foreign Forces to Eventually Quit Syria," Reuters, October 3, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-putin/putin-says-he-wants-all-foreign-forces-to-eventually-quit-syria-idUSKCN1MD1FM>.

24. "Russia committed to 'very strong security of Israel': deputy foreign minister," *I24 News*, January 25, 2019, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/middle-east/193932-190125-russia-committed-to-very-strong-security-of-israel-deputy-foreign-minister>.

25. "Spotlight on Iran," Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, November 4–November 18, 2018, <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/spotlight-iran-november-4-2018-november-18-2018/>.

26. "Tehran will help rebuild Syria, says Iran defence minister," *Al Jazeera* (Doha), August 27, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/08/180827063515742.html>.

27. "Exclusive: Russia, Iran Race for Syria Reconstruction Deals," *Asharq Al-Awsat* (London), September 20, 2018, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1401806/exclusive-russia-iran-race-syria-reconstruction-deals>.

Russia and Israel. Russia's attempts to place constraints on Israel's preventive campaign against Iran in Syria, in turn, has likely boosted Iran's motivation to continue to consolidate its power there.

President Trump's December 2018 announcement of his Administration's intention to withdraw from Syria has only boosted Iran's determination to continue to infiltrate Syria, particularly through the construction of a land corridor that reaches Syria via the Al-Tanf region in the south of the country, where U.S. special forces have been based.<sup>22</sup> (The more recent, partial reversal of the administration's decision may reflect a recognition that the maintenance of U.S. forces at Al-Tanf represents a critical beachhead against a further expansion and solidification of Iranian influence in Syria.)

## A PARTING OF THE WAYS?

Yet, despite Iran's considerable determination to maneuver through the Syrian arena and utilize Russia's presence to its advantage, the long-term interests of the two countries are destined to ultimately diverge. Russia would like to see Syria stabilized under the firm control of the Assad regime and squarely within a Russian sphere of influence. This state of affairs would allow Moscow to present Syria as an example of a successful projection of military force far from Russian borders, and serve as the launchpad for a reinvigorated Russian presence in the Middle East.

Iran, for its part, has very different designs for Syria. Tehran seeks to amalgamate

Damascus into an expanding regional network of Iranian-influenced lands and Iranian-backed radical forces. This axis already includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, powerful militias in Iraq, Yemen's Houthi rebels, and armed Palestinian factions in the Gaza Strip. In an apparent recognition of this difference, President Putin has stated that he would eventually like to see "all foreign forces" quit Syria.<sup>23</sup>

Recently, Russia acknowledged tensions with Iran more explicitly. In January 2019, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergey Ryabkov, rejected the idea that Russia and Iran are allies. Instead, Ryabkov depicted them as simply partners on some goals in Syria, and went as far as to emphasize that Russia remains committed to Israel's security.<sup>24</sup>

At the official level, of course, Iran has denied any such tensions, and maintained that its cooperation with Russia in Syria is proceeding apace. During a recent meeting in Tehran between Russia's envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, and the secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, the latter paid tribute to Iranian-Russian cooperation, describing it as "the main factor that allowed the Syrian military to gain the upper hand in the battlefield." "Iran and Russia will continue to bolster the Syrian armed forces in their struggle against terrorism," Shamkhani added.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, such statements can only partially obscure the emerging tensions between Iran and Russia. More and more, it is apparent that Russia views Iran's military activities in Syria as a


destabilizing factor, while Iran has repeatedly expressed anger about being left out of international negotiations over a political settlement in Syria, and has accused Russia and Turkey of trying to sideline it from talks about Syria's future.

Post-conflict reconstruction in Syria represents another point of tension between Tehran and Moscow. During a late August visit to Damascus, Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami announced that the two countries had agreed Iran would have "presence, participation and assistance" in reconstruction, and that "no third party will be influential in this issue."<sup>26</sup> Yet Russia has reportedly launched a large-scale effort to keep the lion's share of reconstruction tenders for itself, and out of Iranian hands.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, divergent plans for Syria and competition over their respective roles in Syria's future now represent sources of serious tension between Tehran and Moscow. However, it is Iran's persistent use of Syrian territory to build offensive military infrastructure that forms the biggest threat to Russia's long-term vision for Syria.

Ultimately, there has been no sign that Iran is willing to compromise on its long-term aspirations to become a regional and radical hegemon, and it has only shown a willingness to tactically reduce certain levels of activities to avoid a head-on clash with Russia, or to lower its profile after absorbing painful blows from Israel. And so long as Iran remains committed to its force build-up

on Syrian soil, Tehran and Jerusalem will remain on a collision course – even if this conflict has remained muted so far.

That puts Russia's strategic goal of a secure, Assad-dominated Syria at risk, since the flames of an escalating Israeli-Iranian conflict could easily spread and imperil the fragile regime in Damascus. Should that happen, Russia's ability to act as a regional "firefighter" and tamp down tensions is in serious doubt. 

## The American Foreign Policy Council

509 C Street NE  
Washington, DC 20002  
Tel.: (202) 543-1006  
Fax: (202) 543-1007  
[www.afpc.org](http://www.afpc.org)

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