



Civil War in Syria and the Evolution of Russian – Iranian Relations

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Summary

The current level of confrontation between Russia and the West—unprecedented since the end of the Cold War—has resulted in Russia’s pursuit of strengthened ties with many Middle Eastern countries. A series of “*strategic*” and “*tactical*” factors determined the escalation of Russia’s involvement in Syria from its role as a supplier of military hardware and political support, to its direct military intervention in the civil war and war against the ISIL. Amongst the strategic factors, the most important was the Russian elite’s intention to break the “strategic deadlock” that kept Russia subordinated to “western rules and domination” that were diminishing and constraining Moscow’s use of sovereign power domestically and internationally. A set of *tactical factors* includes a mix of geopolitical, military-industrial, economic and ideological drivers such as Russia’s belief in the necessity of avoiding the collapse of a friendly regime; the protection of Russia’s national security; the importance of preventing Muslim radicalism from destabilizing the region; challenging current regimes in the post-Soviet space and—to a certain extent—challenging the West.

Moscow’s involvement in the Syrian conflict had a direct impact on Russian relations with the Middle East. Specifically, it created a solid base for the development of Russian cooperation with Iran. Currently, Moscow and Tehran formed a marriage of convenience in Syria where each partner tries to reach its own goals through joint efforts. However this form of cooperation does not exclude the possibility of future rifts between the two countries.

Moscow’s engagement in Syria also added a new layer of contact, coordination and cooperation between Russia and Israel. This, in turn, resulted in the upgrade of Russian-Israeli ties to a “special relations” status. The harsh reaction from a large part of the Middle East to Russia’s military involvement in Syria compelled Moscow to intensify its attempts to bring some of the Arab countries onto the Russian side in order to dilute the emerging anti-Russian camp in the region. Subsequently, the Kremlin found support in Egypt. Cairo not only praised Moscow’s actions in Syria but also became actively involved in the process of the revitalization of the diplomatic track of the Syrian crisis settlement.

Moscow’s intensified involvement in the regional affairs can also have a direct influence on Russian relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. After a few years of minimal contact, a combination of power shifts, new security threats in the Middle East, and a shift in GCC foreign policies that became slightly less allied with the US, contributed to a recent boost in Russian–Saudi relations with repercussions for other GCC members.

Introduction

Russian attention and regional interests have shifted quite dramatically since 2014. Conflict with Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea resulted in a wave of western economic and political sanctions followed by Russia’s “counter sanctions”. This mutually destructive process has deeply re-shaped Russian external relations. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia became a predominantly western oriented country. However in recent years

Russia emerged as a champion of non-western countries, pursuing a deepened strategic partnership with China and enhanced political and economic relations with the BRIC countries. In order to gain greater international support, Russia has also reconsidered its geopolitical stance towards Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.

However the authors of this paper argue that the current state of “Russia v. West” confrontation is more about fundamentals than tactics and thus goes beyond the “Ukrainian crisis”. The root cause of the confrontation is a common perception amongst the Russian elites, who feel that twenty-five years since the formation of the Russian Federation, Russia is now trapped by the “west” in a multifaceted “deadlock”. Economically—the argument goes— Russia’s subordination to World Trade Organization (WTO) rules resulted in developmental constraints for the Russian economy. Politically, Russia became perceived as an “international spoiler” which negates international norms and rules, particularly since the Georgian war in 2008. Finally, none of Russia’s fundamental security problems have been solved. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is closer to Russian borders, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty was abrogated and labeled a weak “Cold War loser” with a limited regional power status.

Thus, the Kremlin’s actions since 2014, evaluated by many analysts as “opportunistic” or “reactionary” - all display elements of a “deadlock breaking strategy” with no clear end-goal or rigid plan of action. Rather, the Kremlin’s actions are a series of tactical moves intended to create revisions within the existing regional and global order that are in line with Russia’s national interests. In this sense, Russia is becoming a “neo-revisionist” state. However it must be clear that for Russia, such changes are not about an adjustment of the global “market developmental model” – but rather the acceptance of Russia’s civilizational difference and the creation of new regional and global power sharing arrangements.¹

In brief, Russia aims to have greater influence in its neighbourhood by keeping China content, NATO at a healthy distance, and confrontation with the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) at an affordable level. This in turn will allow Russia to create an alternative security umbrella, and to have more say in controlling its own destiny by securing Russia’s economy, identity, and natural resources. A detailed analysis of the multiple factors contributing to the shift in Russian geo-politics is beyond the scope of this paper. This main point explored herein is that Russia’s confrontational stance created a new opening for its relations with the Gulf States. However this new opening is not yet reflected in Russia’s economic and political relations in the region.

Background

Historically, Russia developed a keen interest in the “greater” Middle East through its flagship institution: the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Science in Moscow. The academy became one of the largest European repositories of research and a key source of policy advice on the Middle East throughout the Imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet period. However Russian researchers and policy advisers have traditionally focused on countries

crucial for Russian interests in the region namely: Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Iran. Geo-political and economic interests, (and an accumulated knowledge of one another) translated into higher levels of political, military, and economic relations between Russia and these states. For instance, until the Iraq war in 2003, Russia (and the former Soviet Union) enjoyed close and multifaceted relations with Iraq for almost forty-five years, even calling them a “strategic partner” in the 1980s. Russia also had close ties with both the Yemen Arab Republic and then the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. The countries had particularly close military relations, as illustrated by the training of Yemeni military officers in the Soviet Union and Russia. After Hafez Assad took power in 1971, Russian relations with Syria flourished. In particular, this closeness was demonstrated by intensive military cooperation, including the only Russian naval supply and maintenance base in the Mediterranean in the port city of Tartus under a 1971 agreement. Simultaneously Soviet and Russian research on the Syrian economy society were amongst the highest quality in Europe. Yet despite a deep Russian tradition of studying the Gulf States, with the exception of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, there is no systematic or significant Russian research on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.²

Russian – Iranian relations 1990-2014

As stated by some political analysts, it is hard to find another country other than Iran whose relations with Moscow could experience such a huge number of drastic twists and changes in a short period of time. Between 1991-2012, periods of active political dialogue between Russia and Iran were swiftly interrupted by long pauses during which Moscow and Tehran exchanged accusations of the other's failure to meet treaty commitments and to keep given promises. In Moscow's view, this volatility of bilateral relations could be explained by the fact that between 1991-2012, Russian national interests in Iran played a secondary role in determining the Kremlin's approaches towards the Islamic Republic. In most cases, the Kremlin's diplomacy in Iran was shaped by drivers of Russian foreign policy that were not always directly connected to Tehran. Among these drivers the following played the most important role:

1. Russia's interest in maintaining a certain level of positive dialogue with the West (especially the United States).
2. Russia's interest in ensuring its dominance in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) space as the zone of Russia's national aspirations.
3. Russia's interest in securing stability around the borders of the CIS and Russia (which included Russia's interests in the deterrence of nuclear proliferation).

At the same time, the behaviour of the Iranian authorities towards Russia was also periodically determined by drivers that were not always directly related to the bilateral relations of the two countries. In summary, between 1991-2012, the struggle between pro- and anti-Western elites in the Iran, Iran's claims to dominance in the Middle East, and changes

in the degree of confrontation between Iran and the US, each had a significant impact on Iran's diplomatic approach towards Russia.

The aforementioned factors did not always influence the Russian-Iranian dialogue in a positive way. For instance, the significant attention that Moscow paid to its dialogue with Washington made the Russian authorities see Iran as just another point of leverage that could be used by the Kremlin in its political games with the US. It is notable that Moscow played this card during periods of Russian-American rapprochement and also during moments of great tension between the two countries by freezing Russia's cooperation with Tehran or boosting it respectively. Thus, 2006-2009 marked another period of rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran with certain achievements in cooperation in the energy sector. It could not be a mere coincidence that this dialog began when Russia-American ties experienced a renewed period of serious tension. Moreover, the end of these sweetheart relations "accidentally" coincided with the start of the "reset" in the Russia-American relations initiated by the administration of US president Barak Obama. Experts argue that this reset partly guaranteed Russia's support of the UN Security Council Resolution 1929, Moscow's refusal to export S-300 surface-to-air missile systems to the IRI in 2010, and the de-facto imposition of unilateral sanctions against Iran by Dmitry Medvedev.

The Kremlin's intentions to secure Russian dominance within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) did not always favour the development of a fruitful diplomatic dialogue between Moscow and Tehran. In certain cases, the Russian government considered the maintenance of good relations with CIS countries as more important than maintain positive relations with Iran. This was the case during the division of the Caspian Sea between Russia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan in 2002, when Moscow broke the previously achieved agreement to handle this issue only with the participation of all five littoral countries. This allowed the Moscow to improve its relations with Astana and Baku, but temporary damaged its relations with Iran whose authorities expected that all territorial issues would be settled only in a joint manner. Finally, the dialogue between Moscow and Tehran was also affected by Russian attempts to maintain a certain level of friendly relations with other key Middle Eastern players. For instance, the Iranian authorities have traditionally watched with jealousy Russia's mounting cooperation with Israel. Any achievements in the bilateral relations of the two countries (such as Putin's visits to Israel in 2005 and 2012, as well as the introduction of a visa-free regime for Russian and Israeli tourists in 2008), called into question for Tehran why Moscow was avoiding such a degree of cooperation with Iran.

In the last two decades, Tehran could not also always be considered a reliable partner of Moscow. For instance, in December 2008, the Russian government experienced a serious shock when Iran voted against St. Petersburg in favour of Doha as a place for the deployment of the executive office and the secretariat of the Gas Exporting Countries' Forum (GECF). By chance, the Iranian voice appeared to be decisive in the choice made by the members of this organisation. The outcome of this vote was unexpected for the Russian government. On the eve of the ballot the Russian delegation had reported to Moscow its complete confidence in the result of the vote. Its members thought that they had ensured the support of the majority

of participants for St. Petersburg and had previously reached agreement on this matter with the Iranians. However Russia lost the vote to a tiny Arab state. In addition, the Russian authorities fully realized that they had created a structure with which it would be able to have an influence on the international gas market, but had failed to put it under their control.

Nevertheless, between 1991-2011, both Russia and Iran persistently avoided crossing the red line that would make further dialogue between the countries impossible. The reality of geographical proximity also played a key role. The geostrategic position of Iran allowed it to influence the development of the situation in the Caspian, Caucasian, Central Asian, Middle Eastern and Persian Gulf regions. This inevitably compelled Moscow to discuss with Tehran a large scope of foreign policy issues including: the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh; the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan; the stability of Tajikistan; the encroachment of NATO towards the Trans-Caucasia; the penetration of non-regional powers in the Middle East and Central Asia; the construction of trans-Caspian pipelines; and the issues of the instability of the Caucasus. Since Russia and Iran share a common vision of how to handle some of these problems, Iran's support was (and remains) critical to the success of Moscow's activities aimed at the restoration and strengthening of Russia's position in the region lost after the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991.

The political elites of Russia also remember that unlike Turkey, Iran did not use the fall of the Soviet Union to aggressively further its influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia by propagating ideas of the Islamic revolution, or by funding local nationalistic and religious movements. Moreover, during the mid-1990s, Moscow and Tehran joined their efforts aimed at the cessation of the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997). Iran's behaviour demonstrated that it could be a helpful partner, however these actions of the Iranian authorities were pragmatic not altruistic. During the second Chechen war (1999-2000), Russia's dialog with Tehran brought important results for Moscow. In 1999, Iranian authorities refused to support separatists and also used their position as the country chairing the Organisation of the Islamic conference (OIC), to adopt a pro-Russian resolution at the OIC summit. This decision considerably softened tensions between Russia and some Arab countries on the issue. Under these circumstances, the Russian authorities worked out an unofficial diplomatic strategy towards Iran in 2012 that implied Moscow would balance between Iran and its political opponents (not only the US, but also Israel and Saudi Arabia). The Russian government clearly understood that any alliance or strategic partnership with Iran would inevitably aggravate their relations with the leading countries of the world. Although a positive dialog between Iran and Russia was in the interests of Moscow, the Russian government carefully watched over the development of these partnership relations in order to prevent them from endangering Moscow's diplomatic dialogues with other nations. Prominent Russian expert on Iran, Vladimir Sazhin, called this type of relations a "watchful partnership".³

However Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin in 2012 marked the beginning of a new period in Russian-Iranian relations. As opposed to the more liberal and pro-Western politics of Dmitry Medvedev, Putin was determined to develop relations with non-Western countries. Russian economic and political losses in Libya probably also persuaded him that any

cooperation with the West over the Middle East should be done carefully and not at the expense of other Russian interests. Finally, the attempts of Medvedev's administration to handle international issues through unilateral concessions and compromises—such as resolving the territorial dispute with Norway and Azerbaijan by ceding Russian territory, not opposing the anti-Gadhafi resolution in the UN Security Council, and acknowledging the Soviet role in the Katyn tragedy during World War II—were unacceptable to Russians who missed the imperial style of Soviet diplomacy. The majority of Russians wanted Medvedev's successor to be more active and decisive in protecting their national interests and cementing relations with the non-Western part of the world. Once in office, Vladimir Putin met the public's desire for such policies.

Only two months after his election, President Vladimir Putin met his Iranian counterpart Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The meeting was held on June 7, 2012 on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Shanghai. During the protocol part of the meeting, Putin clearly stated Russian's interest in furthering its relations with Tehran.⁴ The problems that, in the opinion of president Putin, both countries should discuss first of all were also outlined in his speech. These issues included the Iranian nuclear program, Russian-Iranian nuclear cooperation, development of the economic ties that fell beyond their potential, and the legal status of the Caspian Sea. Most importantly, Putin called Iran "an old traditional partner" of Russia. Before 2012, this statement did not often appear in the speeches of the Russian officials addressed to the Iranians who had long awaited such a positive reception.⁵ Since then, the intensity of Moscow's dialogue with Tehran continues to develop. The transition of presidential power in Iran from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Hassan Rouhani also positively contributed to the countries' deepening connection.

Since 2014, consultations between Russian and Iranian officials have covered a wide range of regional problems, in addition to issues of bilateral relations and their perspectives on the settlement of the nuclear dispute. It is an unlikely coincidence that the Kremlin is currently advocating for Iran's inclusion into international discussions of the situations in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq. In September 2014, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov even called Iran "a natural ally" of Russia in the struggle against religious extremism in the Middle East.⁶ These gestures were supposed to demonstrate that Russia regards Iran as more than just a "Southern neighbour".⁷ Economic issues are also a main topic within the current Russian-Iranian dialogue. Moscow's experts believe that Russia and Iran have a unique opportunity to create an economic basis for their co-operation, and the main task is to not lose this chance. Both sides have concrete suggestions and are currently discussing the details of these proposals and adjusting their positions.

However Moscow's increasing interest in Iran is determined by a number of external factors. The first steps that were made by the Kremlin towards Tehran were primarily motivated by the events of the Arab Spring. When Russian authorities decided to intensify their contact with Iran in 2012, they were seriously concerned by Russia's shrinking political and economic presence in the region. Moscow considered Tehran as one of its last footholds in the Middle East, and tried to do its best to secure Russian positions in Iran. In 2014, Russian tensions with

the US and the EU over Ukraine resulted in substantial changes to Moscow's foreign policy and provided another reason for the Kremlin to strengthen its cooperation with Iran. The unprecedented — since the end of the Cold War— scale of confrontation with the West made Moscow regard the intensification of its contacts with Middle Eastern countries as highly important.

Since 2012, the Russian government has actively worked to secure an effective dialogue between authorities in Tehran and the West on the nuclear issue. It is necessary to remember that Sergei Lavrov's 2012 proposals set the stage for the current round of negotiations. During talks between Iran and the P5+1 group in Vienna, Russian diplomats were noticeably active. On the sidelines of the November negotiations, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Ryabkov held bilateral consultations with almost all countries involved. These efforts did not go unnoticed, at least in Tehran. On November 25, 2014, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani personally called Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss the results of the Vienna negotiations and assure him of Iran's intentions to continue the dialogue with the P5+1. Russian interest in the settlement of the nuclear issue was simple: Moscow hoped that reaching a nuclear agreement would eliminate the sanctions that have hindered Russia's economic activity in the Iran. Moscow also hoped that a nuclear agreement would guarantee that Iran would not become another "hot spot" on the CIS periphery.

Russian and Iranian military engagement in Syria

Russian Intervention in Syria – Motives and Goals

The first step in assessing Russia's military engagement in Syria is to understand the Kremlin's motives. In this section, the authors will attempt to go beyond the standard explanations and stereotypes explaining "what Putin wants in Syria", which are ubiquitous and very powerful both in Russia and the West/NATO countries. The second challenge is to situate Russia's military campaign within the larger picture of its regional and global strategic objectives, in which Syria plays an important but not central role. Third, at the time we write this paper (April 2016), the situation in Syria is still very volatile. The authors expect serious setbacks to the current peace initiatives, which may alter Russia's policy towards Syria and could also affect Russian-Iranian relations. There was both a "strategic" and "tactical" set of factors behind Russia's escalation of its involvement in Syria from its role as a "supplier of military hardware and political support" to Russia's direct military intervention in the Syrian civil war and war with IS. Only a combination of these factors—against the backdrop of a critically disastrous military situation for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad by early 2015—can explain the first openly-conducted, unprovoked, full-scale military operation abroad for post-Soviet Russia.⁸

Let us start with the more general, "strategic" factors that contributed to Russia's intervention in Syria. Key among them was to break what Russian elite's perceived as a "strategic deadlock" which kept Russia subordinated to "western rules and domination," and thus diminished and constrained Russia's sovereign power domestically and internationally.

Therefore, the strategic intention of Russia (that is also part of its decision to become militarily involved in Syria) is to break this deadlock at almost any cost. The set of “*tactical factors*” guiding Russia’s motives for intervention include a mix of geopolitical, military-industrial, economic and ideological factors that are summarized below.⁹ Before intervening militarily in Syria in September 2015, Russia had two poor choices: a) intervening and being part of the Syrian civil war, or worse, b) not intervening and facing the consequences of no-action. Although Russia knew that the situation in the Syria was very problematic, with violations of human rights and criminal actions by the Syrian army, it was motivated to intervene by the following six tactical factors:

1. To preserve Syria as a singular and secular state (preferably with but possibly without Bashar al-Assad as head of state).¹⁰ Russia has consistently criticized the doctrine of regime change and opposed every attempt by the US-led coalition to impose it on Syria.
2. To avoid the collapse of a friendly regime and a tragic scenario like that in Libya, where the removal of Gaddafi brought about a rapid disintegration of the country¹¹. For Russia – at the time of its decision to support Assad militarily –the possibility of Syria becoming a “failed state”, eventually governed by multiple regional/local warlords competing with IS was very realistic indeed.¹²
3. To show the capacity to break the US-led coalition’s “security umbrella” and demonstrate Russia’s military capacity, including use of some of the most advanced weapons in the Russian arsenal¹³; also to prevent further Western-led military interventions in Russian areas of interests.¹⁴
4. To protect Russia's national security by eliminating as many potential enemies and Islamic radicals (terrorists) as possible before the possible return to Russia of the estimated 4000-5000 Russian-born IS fighters that are currently in Syria and Iraq.¹⁵
5. To prevent Muslim radicalism/IS or similar groups from mushrooming in Central Asia and/or destabilizing the region and challenging current regimes, which is a very important area for Russia and China’s future economic development and mutual cooperation.¹⁶

Russian and Iranian Interests in Syria – Convergence or Divergence?

Earlier in this paper we discussed the complex economic, political, and cultural aspects of Russian-Iranian relations. At this point we would like to focus our observations on how Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria adjusted and crystalized their mutual interests. We may characterize Russian relations with the Middle East (broadly defined) as a “*policy of equal distance*” or “*equal proximity*.” That is to say that Russia is trying to keep and develop good relations with all regional states with which it is not in direct conflict. If Russia tries to avoid being cast as an exclusive or dominant supporter of a particular regime, this permits it to act

with certain flexibility in the region. Such a policy also has its drawbacks. The process of balancing relations often leads to a mistrust of Russia's motives and prevents it from building deeper, long-term alliances. Relations with Iran follow a similar pattern, where some converging interests and mutual support are balanced by a divergence of goals and methods. Please see the following summary of Russian-Iranian interests and relations that will be developed later on in this paper:

1. The military campaign in Syria proved that military-to-military relations carry a good degree of coordination.
2. Russian's warm relations with Israel significantly deepened during the Russian campaign in Syria, making Iran uncomfortable and preventing it from confidently sharing information with Russia¹⁷.
3. Military cooperation (in particular the delivery of S-300 systems and Syria-tested hardware) is going well and will likely increase in the future despite facing issues of financing.¹⁸
4. Economic cooperation is growing particularly in the area of agricultural products¹⁹, however there are issues of capital flow, as Russian and Iranian banks do not yet smoothly cooperate.²⁰
5. Russia has a population of 15 million Sunni Muslims and this community is watching very carefully to see to what extent Russia is working with Iran. It is worth noting that many of Russia's mosques and madrasas were largely financed by Saudi Arabia, and that the Saudis exercise a certain influence among Russian Muslims who share anti-Iranian sentiments.
6. Iran is not interested in a prolonged confrontation between Russia and the West. Iran would like to economically benefit after the nuclear deal, but its proximity to Russia is spoiling some of Iran's opportunities in the west to reach this goal.

Opinions within the international expert community are still far from unanimous as to the nature of the Russian-Iranian dialogue on Syria. While some researchers argue about the emergence of a strong regional alliance between Moscow and Tehran, others insist that the cooperation between the two countries remains extremely fragile and predict a near-end to the Russian-Iranian collaboration. Opponents and supporters of the theory of a Russian-Iranian alliance in Syria both refer to the solid facts when proving their positions. However, the authors of this paper argue that neither side is correct in their conclusions. The devil, as always, is in the details. While Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria will have long-lasting positive dynamics, there are factors that will not allow this dialogue to reach the level of a full-fledged military and political strategic alliance.

First of all, the Iranian political establishment does not have a unified opinion on the necessity to cooperate with Russia in Syria. There are even Iranian policymakers and analysts who

cautiously question the rationale behind Tehran's military involvement in Syria. For instance, in October 2015, prominent Iranian politician Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani clearly stated his critical attitude to any military attempts to solve the Syrian crisis. When commenting on the beginning of the Russian air raids in Syria, Hashemi-Rafsanjani stated that he is against the bombings of Syria regardless of whoever conducts them. Air strikes, he said, can hardly be an alternative to negotiations as a way to end to the conflict. Unexpectedly, Moscow is also criticized among the traditional supporters of Tehran's active role in the Syrian crisis namely by Iranian radical conservatives and some IRGC members. The latter believe that the immense military efforts aimed at the support of the Assad regime bought Iran the right to decide the destiny of Syria. Under these circumstances, Russia's direct military involvement in the conflict became a source of serious concern for the Iranian military elite. They are afraid that Moscow is capable of stealing an Iranian victory. Shortly after the beginning of Russia's military operation in Syria, the pro-IRGC news agencies started to argue that Russian air raids and their seriously psychological ramifications for civilians, will make the Syrian regime forget about the resources Iran dedicated to the survival of Damascus. Consequently, Tehran might not play the role in determining the future of a post-conflict Syria it deserves. Additionally, some Iranian media outlets called on the Iranian authorities to not trust Russia, pointing out that Moscow might simply trade off Damascus for increased investments from the Arab monarchies of the Gulf. The active contact between Russia and the GCC countries only strengthened these concerns in Tehran.

Yet, neither Hashemi-Rafsanjani, nor the IRGC commanders backed by radical conservatives have the last word in determining Tehran's approaches to Syria and Russia. It is the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, who takes final decisions on the most sensitive political questions. During his meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in November 2015, Khamenei gave the green light for an Iranian cooperation with Russia on Syria. The Supreme Leader's decision was largely supported by the moderate conservative majority that dominated Iranian politics at the time. Immediately after Putin's trip to Tehran, international affairs advisor to the Supreme Leader, Ali Akbar Velayati (who is deeply involved in Iranian diplomacy towards Syria), formulated the official point of view on Russian-Iranian cooperation that became widely accepted within the Iranian political establishment. He argued that the Iranian authorities are determined to have "continuous and long-lasting cooperation with Russia" regarding the situation in Syria.²¹ According to Velayati, Russian efforts aimed at the settlement of the Syrian issue were completely coordinated with Iran. The Iranian politician argued that, in the past, Russia and Iran had conflicting views on some aspects of the problem, but, finally, the two countries managed to agree on them as well.

Iran's decision to establish an active cooperation with Russia on Syria was determined by a number of factors. At the geostrategic level, the beginning of Moscow's military involvement in Syrian affairs finally gave the Iranian authorities what they had been looking for throughout the last decade: solid political ground for the development of bilateral relations. Since the 2000s, Tehran was searching for a leading world power that could act as a counterweight to US pressure on Iran. Traditionally, Russia was arguably the preferred candidate for this role.

Yet during the last decade, Tehran's attempts to win Moscow's support typically ended in failure. The Kremlin cooperated with Tehran on a case-by-case basis. Russian authorities closely watched Russian-Iranian cooperation to ensure that it never adversely affected Russia's dialogue with the West. Nevertheless, even the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Actions (JCPOA) between Iran and the P5+1 group (which substantially eased Iranian relations with the West) did not change the plans of Tehran to use Moscow as a counterbalance to the US in the region. Statements made by Khamenei between September-December 2015, showed that the highest Iranian leadership still mistrusted the West and expected its confrontation with the US to continue. Mutual Russian-Iranian interests in saving the Assad government had finally created the long-awaited conditions for strengthening Iran's cooperation with Russia. Putin's decision to deploy Russian troops in Syria opened even more options for such cooperation. Since September 2015, both Russia and Iran remain involved militarily in Syria. This, in turn, triggered a greater need for coordination between the two countries.

The need to develop active cooperation between Iran and Russia in Syria was also determined by the situation on the Syrian battlefield itself. Iran was the first to supply the Syrian regime with arms, financial means, and "volunteers", while Russia initially tried to limit its involvement in the crisis to providing diplomatic support to the Assad government. However by 2015, Iranian resources were substantially exhausted. Moreover, it became obvious that these resources were not enough to save Assad. By that time, Tehran was also deeply involved in the Syrian civil war and also in the Iraqi and Yemeni conflicts. Consequently, the Iranian government was compelled to juggle its limited human and material resources between its allies in these three countries. Under these circumstances, Tehran's capacities were considerably overstretched. Thus, as believed by some experts, the fall of Idlib to the Syrian rebels in the spring of 2015 was partly determined by the miscalculations of the Iranian commandment. In order to help the Iraqi government in its struggle against ISIL, the commandment relocated the Shia militia to Iraq from Syria. This left the Syrian forces without necessary backup, and they were subsequently defeated in Idlib and in Palmira. Russia's transition into direct military involvement in Syria considerably eased the burden lying on Iran's shoulders by radically changing the balance of power in favor of Damascus. Moscow also provided the Syrian regime and its Iranian allies with two things they seriously lacked: modern artillery systems and effective air support. The beginning of Russian air strikes provided a serious incentive for Iran to increase (at least temporary) the numbers of its military forces and proxies in Syria in order to help the Syrian army stabilize the situation on the front lines (especially, near Aleppo) in October-November 2015.

While the motives and ultimate goals pursued by Russia and Iran in Syria are different, their current priorities are the same. Both Moscow and Tehran are interested in saving the remaining government institutions of the country. This common task plays in favor of Russian-Iranian cooperation, although each country certainly has its own reasons for saving the remnants of the regime. Russia is largely driven by its security concerns and strong beliefs that the building of a new post-conflict Syria is only possible through the evolution of the old

regime, not through its destruction. The confrontation with the West and Putin's plans to reestablish Russia as an influential world power were the other key factors that led Moscow to support the Syrian authorities in their struggle.²² For Tehran, the necessity to save the government institutions is determined by a different line of reasoning. By supporting the Assad government in Syria, Iran fights for its place in the system of regional affairs. The Iranian conservatives even formulated the concept of the "chain/line of defense" that is comprised of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. According to Iranian conservatives, each of these countries represents the "front line" of Iran's defenses against its international and regional opponents who strive to undermine its influence in the Middle East. Iranian military involvement in Syria is also seen by the leadership of the Iran as a part of its traditional stand off against Israel and the US. In December 2015, Ali Akbar Velayati openly called Syria "the bridge" that connects Iran with Lebanon (i.e. Hezbollah) and Palestine, and that this "bridge" can only be used by Tehran with the help of the Alawi regime. This inevitably puts Damascus in the center of the Iranian-Israeli-American triangle. Thus, according to another advisor to Khamenei, Yahya Rahim-Safawi, the final goal of the US anti-Assad movement in Syria is to ensure the security of Israel.

It seems that neither Moscow nor Tehran have any illusions about their ultimately divergent goals in Syria. When characterizing the level of cooperation between Russia and Iran in Syria Velayati argued that, "each country pursues its own benefits [by supporting Assad], [but] Russia cannot protect its interests in the Middle East and the region alone". In turn, Iran agreed to help Moscow. Iranian authorities believe that in Syria they are involved in a "small world war" and that without Russian support it will be difficult to profit from the war. In other words, Russia and Iran understand that in order to secure their own interests in Syria they need to cooperate. Consequently, Moscow and Tehran formed a marriage of convenience where each partner tries to reach its own goals through joined efforts. Such an approach implies that the partners not only coordinate their activities, but also try to avoid unnecessary confrontation over issues of secondary importance. They make concessions by temporarily postponing any discussion of disputed issues that may prevent either side from the achieving their primary goals.²³

However there are, at least, three factors that substantially limit Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria. First, neither Russia nor Iran is interested in a full-fledged alliance. Moscow has no wish to be part of a pro-Shia camp confronting the GCC-led Sunni coalition. This would affect Russian security as its Muslim population of 15 million is largely Sunni. Tehran is also concerned about being involved in Russia's wider confrontation with the West while it seeks European technologies and money. Second, Moscow guaranteed Israel that Russian actions in Syria would not pose a threat to Israel.²⁴ This, of course, is contrary to Iran's interests. Iran will attempt to increase its presence in southern Syria in order to have better access to Hezbollah and the Israeli borders. The final reason Russia-Iranian cooperation is limited is that the Iranians expect a pay-off from Syria when the conflict is over. Now they will need to share this pay-off with Moscow. This could undermine any revival of the Iran-Iraq-Syria-Mediterranean gas pipeline project that Tehran desires but is a concern for Russia. Moreover,

a part of the Syrian elite welcomes Russia's presence as a means to balance Tehran. This will inevitably concern the Iranians whose military leaders do not see Assad as just a mere foreign policy tool.

Russia and Iran appear to understand the limits of their cooperation in Syria and so far, military coordination between the two has been active but patchy. Neither country is in a hurry to create joint command structures. In most cases, Russian and Iran simply prefer to take parallel paths to the same destination. When developing its cooperation with Tehran, Russia seriously takes into account the GCC factor. Moscow obviously does not want to position itself as a full ally of Iran as this would affect Russian relations with the Saudi-led GCC, which the Kremlin still considers a potential source of financial investment for the Russian economy. The financial support and political blessing of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi is important for the successful implementation of joint projects with Egypt such as the creation of a joint industrial zone or the development of an Egyptian nuclear industry. The Russian-Iranian alliance will undermine Moscow's diplomatic efforts to settle the Syrian crisis by making the Saudis less willing to talk to Russia. This would effectively drag Moscow into the middle of the broader Sunni-Shia confrontation, allowing anti-Russian political forces in the Middle East to portray the Kremlin as an enemy of the Sunni world.

Such a portrayal would be a serious threat to the Russia's position in the region, but also, conceivably, to the domestic security of Russia where the Muslim population of 15 million is predominantly Sunni. Salafi groupings in the Gulf have depicted Russians as new crusaders since the beginning of the civil war in Syria. In October 2015, Moscow also received a warning when approximately 50 Saudi clerics signed an open declaration calling for jihad against Moscow. This has created an ideological background for the unification of radical forces in Syria and provides motivation for supporters of radical Islam in the GCC to intensify their financial support of Islamists inside Russia. Russian silence on Tehran's diplomatic confrontation with Riyadh might also be an attempt to improve Moscow's image in the Sunni world. Russia's image suffered severely after it began bombing the Syrian opposition which, (along with the radical Islamists), became one of the main targets of the Russian air forces in the autumn of last year.

Russia's Strategic Interests, Presence, and Foreign Policy in the Gulf Region

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries

Russia's relations with GCC countries are driven by long-term interests such as participating in strategic geo-political arrangements that determine the global supply of gas and oil. Russian relations are also equally driven by short-term interests, namely any opportunity to mitigate the effects of the 2014-2015 international sanctions which followed the annexation of Crimea in March, 2014. Russian foreign policymakers believe in the "grand bargaining" approach (*à la* US-China rapprochement, the Oslo Accord between Palestinians and Israelis, and the nuclear deal with Iran), as an effective way to achieve progress in solving strategic international issues. In this spirit, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Saudi Arabia in

February 2007. It was the first official visit for the Russian leader to Iran. This visit was intended to facilitate a “grand bargain” however it did not produce the expected results of deeper coordination at the level of oil production. However the visit was a good opportunity for Moscow to present its position and conclude some commercial agreements. After a few years of minimal contact, a shift in GCC foreign policies that became slightly less allied with the US contributed to a boost in Russian–Saudi interaction. This might renew a “grand bargain” approach in their bilateral relations, with repercussions for other GCC members.

The second driver towards deepening relations with GCC is Russia’s attempt to minimize the consequences of international sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. As a result, Russia is turning towards Middle East and Asian investors to reduce its reliance on western financial institutions. However Russia is not only seeking investment within the GCC. For instance, it is also interested in joint projects in bio-medical, pharmaceutical, petrochemical, nuclear, IT and space fields. So far the volume of trade (about 1.8-1.9 billion dollars last year) is far below Russian expectations. Russia is also extremely interested in breaking the US/Western monopoly on the military equipment trade with the GCC by offering not only sale but also co-production of its more sophisticated weapons. Our second point, then, is that we can expect warmer and intensified relations between Russia and the GCC due to structural and tactical factors. The GCC countries are trying to find their new “comfort zone” under US tutelage, signalling a departure from traditional total reliance on the US. Meanwhile, Russia’s strategic choice of partners has shifted in the last two years to selected countries in Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. Both Russian and the GCC can offer complimentary services (e.g., investments in technology/military hardware) and deeper security cooperation as they are both targets of Muslim radicals. However, warmer and intensified relations will likely require four key conditions. First, Russia/the GCC will need to agree on having “blind zones”. That is, they will need to recognize areas of bilateral relations in which Russia/the GCC will purposefully ignore mutual irritants (such as Russia’s close relations with Iran or Syria, Saudi support for religious schools in Russia, and alleged Qatari support for separatist in the Caucasus). Second, Russia and the GCC will need to renew work of the high-level “intergovernmental commission” that stopped functioning in the last five years, depriving all parties from face to face meetings of “real” decision makers in key areas such as cooperation in oil/gas, high-volume investment, civil nuclear capacity, and military cooperation. Third, that such development will not face direct US opposition (taking into account the very high level of US involvement in the GCC, their leverage and influence decisively trump Russia and may derail or slow down Russia-GCC rapprochement). Fourth, pending developments in Syria, Russia and the GCC can be actively involved in a “post conflict” reconstruction of Syria where both parties complement each other. Russia could contribute expertise and limited funds, and the GCC could provide some expertise and most of funding.

Egypt

Russian military involvement in Syria produced a harsh anti-Russia backlash throughout the Middle East. This compelled Moscow to intensify its attempts to bring some of the Arab countries onto the Russian side, as a means of diluting anti-Russian sentiment in the region.

Subsequently, the Kremlin tried to find support in Egypt. Russia's efforts brought the expected effect: Cairo supported Moscow's actions in Syria but also became actively involved in the revitalization of the diplomatic track of the Syrian crisis settlement by arranging the dialogue between the different groupings of the Syrian opposition. However Egyptian support of Russian efforts was determined by Cairo's natural concerns about the rise of the jihadism in the Middle East, and its concurrent rapprochement with Moscow. The substantial improvement in relations between the two countries within the last two years should not be considered as exceptional, unexpected, or based solely on their common interest in fighting against Islamic radicals. The intensification of an all-embracing Russian-Egyptian diplomatic dialogue resulted from a gradual strengthening of Russian-Egyptian ties during the last two decades. It is notable that Egypt's interest in establishing closer relations with Moscow was demonstrated by Egyptian authorities both under Hosni Mubarak and Mohamed Morsi. It was they (not Abdel Fattah al-Sisi) who prepared the groundwork for what some Russian and Egyptian experts consider "Russia's return" to Egypt. Therefore the choice of Moscow as one of Cairo's potential partners was determined not only by the current developments in Egypt and the Middle East, but also by deep and strategic calculations of the Egyptian elite.

The personality of Russian President Vladimir Putin has also played an important role in the spirit of Russian-Egyptian cooperation. Putin's political agenda aimed at the creation of a multi-polar world and Russia's increased interaction with non-Western players inevitably pulls Egypt (as one of the key players in the Middle East) into the zone of Moscow's interests. However Russian analysts and diplomats are also quick to highlight Putin's personal positive attitude towards Sisi. Some members of Putin's administration have even discussed that a certain "chemistry" exists between the two presidents which helps them to find a common understanding.

Russia also seems to be trying to reclaim the Soviet Union's role as an alternative to the U.S in Egypt. From this perspective, the memory of a Soviet presence in the region serves as an additional assistance to the Russian government. However, Moscow plays this card very carefully. As opposed to the Soviet Union, modern Russia understands that it cannot compete with the US in term of its economic and political influence. The Kremlin does not oppose itself directly to Washington, but exploits existing disappointment in US actions towards Egypt through practical moves that contrast with American and European behaviour. Thus, the reluctance of Washington to protect Mubarak when compared with the support Russia provided to Assad makes Cairo think about Moscow as a more reliable partner. The decision of the US and EU to limit weapon exports to Egypt in 2013 was one of the reasons for the intensification of the Russian-Egyptian discourse on military cooperation.

The Russian leadership also does not seek to impose its views by force or through economic coercion. In its dialogue with Cairo, Moscow tries to focus on existing commonalities rather than on differences and contradictions. In all cases, the Kremlin remains extremely pragmatic. Russia was one of the first countries to start a dialogue with the Egyptian government after the fall of Mubarak's regime. In November 2012, Lavrov visited the country and confirmed the Russian government's readiness to pursue political and economic cooperation with Egypt,

regardless of the Islamist background of Egyptian president, Mohamed Morsi.²⁵ The signal sent from Moscow was simple: close ties only with American and European leaders did not save Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Qaddafi from their fate (i.e. there is a necessity to rely on alternative forces which could be represented by Moscow). Moscow was equally interested in dealing with Morsi as the president of Egypt and, later on, with General Sisi as his “successor”²⁶. Russia does not raise the question of political freedoms in Egypt and instead emphasizes its readiness to deal with any type of government as long as Cairo wants to deal with Moscow. Finally, in its economic efforts, the Kremlin puts its main stake on those areas where it has market advantages: nuclear energy, oil and gas, petro-chemistry, space, weapons and grain. The attempts of the Russian government to promote the interests of Russian businesses in Egypt at the very highest level between 2013 – 2015 was another factor that boosted the development of the economic ties between the two countries.²⁷.

Yet Moscow’s influence and cooperation within Egypt has its limits. Russia’s success in Egypt is largely determined by the mistakes made by the EU and US in their respective regional policies. Any corrections in US/EU approaches to the regional issues would definitely limit Russian capacities to manoeuvre. Another problem is related to the state of the Egyptian economy. Cairo is unable to invest money in the majority of the joint projects without external sponsors. Russia does not want to invest its own money exclusively as there are high chances of a zero return. Russia also does not have the funds necessary to act as a sole investor. So far, the traditional sponsors of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, stated their intention to help Cairo with financing certain Russian-Egyptian projects. However, given the difficult relations between Moscow and the GCC, they may change their decision any time. There is also a high probability that Egypt is simply using the Kremlin’s interest in closer contacts as leverage to improve their own relations with the US. If Cairo intensifies its diplomatic dialogue with Russia, this will likely make Washington more flexible on sensitive bilateral issues. However, this does not create a solid base for long-term partner relations.

Israel

Russia’s current relations with Israel are based on a high level of mutual pragmatism and calculation, and boast an impressive improvement in the “depth” of their military, political and business cooperation during the last five years.²⁸ Russia’s engagement in Syria – surprisingly to many - added a new layer of contact, coordination and cooperation to Russian-Israeli military relations but also resulted in better coordination of several policies regionally and lifted them up at to a “special relations “status”.²⁹ There are several factors influencing Russian-Israeli relations including the one million Israelis that came to Israel from the former Soviet Union. These citizens speak Russian, visit Russia, watch Russian TV, participate in Russian cultural life and have developed strong business ties with Russia. However many Israelis also feel uncomfortable with the use of anti-Semitic discourse in the platforms and speeches of nationalist political movements in Russia as reported by human rights monitors particularly in late 1990s and early 2000s. ³⁰ Since then, the situation has improved significantly. In April 2016, the president of the World Jewish Congress, thanked Russian President Vladimir Putin for his efforts in fighting anti-Semitism in Russia saying, “anti-

Semitism was down to a "minimal level" in Russia, while in Europe it still "raises its head".³¹ President Putin responded by saying that "Russian Jewish organizations make a significant contribution to political stabilization in Russia, for which we are very grateful". Such statements, which became more frequent in 2016, signal Russia and Israel's mutual desire to downplay existing irritants in favour of constructing stronger relations.³² Yakov Ravkin summarized multiple reasons for such improvement in the following ways³³ :

1. "Israel is usually believed to be more interested in cooperation with Russia, namely in access to Russia's market and to her fossil fuels as well as in using her political influence [...]."
2. "Russia is mainly interested in harnessing Israeli technologies for industrial modernization"
3. "Military and strategic cooperation continues to increase, both in terms of joint production of weaponry and regular official consultations on security issues. Active cooperation has developed in several high-tech areas, including work on dual-use technologies.[...] There exists a joint business council, and a bilateral innovation fund [...] [which] is meant to create a matrix of interlinks between Russian and Israeli technology producers".
4. "Finally, both Russia and Israel, referring to their respective 'special circumstances,' are ambivalent about their adherence to Western democratic values."

If we add to this already convincing list intensive cultural exchanges, visa-free travel, extensive transportation links (including more than 60 daily flights), similar brands of social conservatism in both countries, Israel's refusal to condemn Russia's annexation of Crimea, and its criticism of the Western sanctions that followed, we can see Russian-Israeli relations are likely to remain strong and stable.³⁴ In recent years Russia, has also consistently avoided direct criticism of Israeli policies in the occupied territories.³⁵ Relatively recently, according to Israeli sources, Putin also promised "not to push" the idea of the WMD free zone in the Middle East.³⁶ Russia and Israel also reached a high level of information sharing and coordination through their activities in Syria³⁷ which were enhanced by a special secure telephone line that will allow a direct and encrypted connection between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Conclusions

It seems that Russian/GCC relations are gaining momentum in almost all areas of mutual interests. This is even true in areas which were frozen for years including the Saudi–Russian "intergovernmental commission" to oversee major bilateral initiatives in oil/gas production and exploration. It is difficult to offer definitive conclusions as to 'why' Russian/GCC relations are improving and for how long this increased connectivity will last. However, in the last two

months alone there was an avalanche of trade, investment, technical cooperation and regulatory agreements between Russia and some of the GCC countries.

In the spring of 2015, during an International Defense Exhibition in Abu Dhabi (IDEX) Russia and the GCC signed several contracts (including contracts to supply ammunition to the UAE military, and to supply naval guns and anti-aircraft missiles system). Russia also offered long-term arrangements in the selling, training, and maintenance of weapons systems. However what was even more surprising was the intensity of contact and avalanche of agreements reached with Saudi Arabia during the latest St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF) in June 2015. Key among these were Saudi Arabia's formal commitment to invest up to \$10 billion dollars in Russia within four to five years, six agreements on issues such as civilian nuclear power and energy production. Russian President Vladimir Putin also met with the Saudi Arabian deputy crown prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud to discuss potential military cooperation. Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ali bin Ibrahim Al-Naimi, and Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak co-signed an executive program for implementation of the petroleum cooperation agreement between Saudi Arabia and Russia thus "creating a petroleum alliance between the two countries for the benefit of the international oil market as well as producing countries and stabilizing and improving the market."³⁸

Most likely, increased cooperation between Russia and the GCC countries can be explained by an accumulation of factors discussed above including:

1. Balancing alliances (GCC/Russia),
2. Post conflict cooperation in Syria (GCC/Russia)
3. Shift of interest towards Eurasia (GCC/Russia),
4. Mitigation of sanctions (Russia),
5. Re-balancing global supply in hydrocarbons (GCC/Russia),
6. Regional terrorism (Russia/GCC)

In conclusion, we clearly see that there is the huge potential for an improvement in GCC-Russia relations. If both Russia and the GCC manage to harness the opportunity, the region will soon see a new phase in Russia/GCC relations that will change the way we see geo-strategic alliances in the Middle East in the 21st century.

Endnotes

¹ Compare: <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/Commentary-Russia-Must-Walk-a-Fine-Line-With-West-Amid-Crises-in-Ukraine-Syria-17888>

² The situation is even worse on the GCC side, where there is no specialized research center on Russian/Eurasian studies and GCC Universities are not involved in Russian-oriented research. So mutual interest(s) in each other is accompanied by mutual (relative) ignorance about each other. The lack of knowledge produces a lack of understanding (the classic example is GCC's mistrust of Russia based on her – misinterpreted - cooperation with Iran, which is seen as one of the key impediments to Russia–GCC relations). It seems obvious to us that more investment should be made on both sides in policy-oriented research to support a mutual sense of opportunities in closer cooperation.

³ <http://carnegie.ru/2015/05/05/understanding-revitalization-of-russian-iranian-relations/i8lz>

⁴ It shall be noted however that Russian public attitude towards Iran is not following attitudes of the Russian elite and can be located between moderate sympathy and indifference towards Iran. It is perceived neither as a viable opponent, nor as an important ally. Although the political elites' efforts in brokering the nuclear deal with Iran were in the news, it did not change significantly attitudes to Iran. But by arguing *a contrariol*Iran is also not seen as an ally of the US or Europe thus becoming a potential ally of Russia. Opinion polls conducted in Russia in 2010 – 2015 are summarized below:

Mar 23, 2016: In a focus group representative of middle class, participants believe Russia is a great power surrounded by foes. They mention China, India, and Iran as the rare countries that do not pressure Russia. <http://www.levada.ru/2016/03/23/hotyat-li-russkie-vojn-y-vojna-i-terror-v-vospriyatii-rossiyan/>; Dec 28, 2015: When asked events in which countries had them worried in the year 2015, only 1% mention Iran. Less than 1% value Iran's accomplishments as something of worth to Russia. <http://www.levada.ru/2015/12/28/itogi-uhodyashhego-goda-i-samyevazhnye-sobytiya-2015-go/> ; Mar 18, 2014: Which countries should Russia cooperate with in its foreign policy? In this survey, Iran is grouped with Cuba, Venezuela, Syria, and North Korea. Compared to previous years, more respondents believe Russia should orient its policy toward these countries (14%, compared to 10% in 2013 and 8% in 2011). <http://www.levada.ru/2014/03/18/otnoshenie-rossiyan-k-drugim-stranam-4/> Mar 14, 2012: What should Russia do in the event of a military conflict between the US and Iran? 5% said Russia should support Iran in 2010, 13% in 2012 (in both years, 3% would support the US). <http://www.levada.ru/2012/03/14/rossiya-na-mezhdunarodnoj-arene-2/>; Jun 8, 2015: 2010 through 2015, 1-2% of respondents mention Iran as a close ally of Russia. However, the number of those who believe Iran is an enemy went down from 7% in 2010-2012 to 2% in 2015. <http://www.levada.ru/2015/06/08/mezhdunarodnye-otnosheniya-druzya-i-vragi-rossii/>; Mar 25, 2010: What is the biggest threat to Russian security? In 2007, 9% of respondents believed it was Iran's nuclear program, 6% – North Korean missiles, and 62% – American missile defense in neighboring countries. In 2010, perception of threat from the Iranian nuclear program rose to 13%, North Korean missiles – to 13%, and American missile defense systems were considered to be dangerous by 55% of respondents. <http://www.levada.ru/2010/03/25/iranskaya-ugroza-v-rossijskom-obshhestvennom-mnenii/>; Oct 15, 2015: In 2015, no one thinks Iran could attack Russia. In 1990, 5% thought so. (However, Iran is grouped in this survey with Pakistan, GDR, and

Poland.) <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=115431>; Oct 8, 2014: Who are Russia's friends and enemies? 1% said Iran was a friend, both in 2008 and 2014. Less than 1% believed Iran was an enemy in 2014. (There is no data for 2008 in this survey.) <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=115016>; Jan 14, 2014: When asked what the main event of 2013 was, only 1% of respondents recalled the Iranian nuclear program. <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=114669>; Dec 27, 2013: Which question/answer did you like the most during Putin's direct line? 1% note the question/answer on controlling the Iranian nuclear program. <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=114661>

⁵ See also: V. Putin "We aimed at development of relations with Iran. This is our fundamental choice", <http://rg.ru/2013/12/19/putin-site.html>

⁶ <http://www.fairobserver.com/region/europe/are-the-russians-and-iranians-friends-12812/>

⁷ More on joint anti – terrorist actions: <http://rg.ru/2013/11/21/fsin-anons.html>

⁸ Compare: Sergey Minasyan, Russia's Syrian Campaign STRATEGIC GAMBIT OR REGIONAL ZUGZWANG?

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⁹ See: Vitaly Naumkin, "Russian role in Syria is still anyone's guess," Al-Monitor, September 25, 2015, accessed January 25, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/contents/articles/originals/2015/09/russia-anti-terrorism-intervention-syria-isis.html> and Vitaly Naumkin, "Что дадут три новых проекта сирийского регулирования?" Russia in Global Politics, September 25, 2016, accessed January 26, 2016, <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/global-processes/Chto-dadut-tri-novykh-proekta-siriiskogo-uregulirovaniya-17159>

¹⁰ Point shared among others by Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis," International Affairs 89.4 (2013).

¹¹ See Margarete Klein, "Russia and the Arab Spring: Foreign and Domestic Policy Challenges." German Institute for International and Security Affairs, February 2012.

¹² Compare with: Vasily Kuznetsov, the Islamic State: An Alternative Statehood? <http://valdaiclub.com/publications/valdai-papers/valdai-paper-32-the-islamic-state-an-alternative-statehood/>

¹³ "The Syrian campaign demonstrated Russia's increased capacity to project military strength beyond its borders. Such far-flung Russian military power has not been seen since Soviet deployment of troops to Egypt (1970-1972) and Syria (1983-1984). Russia has flown a record number of sorties, pushing aircraft to their capacity. Russia has also used Syria to battle-test post-Soviet conventional weapons. Much of its equipment is either completely new or has been significantly upgraded. Su-30SM and Su-35S fighter jets flew in combat for the first time, as did Su-34 bombers equipped with new smart armaments, including satellite-guided aerial bombs." Sergey Minasyan *ibid*.

¹⁴ On that aspect see: Hill, Fiona. "The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad." Foreign Affairs, March 25, 2013. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139079/fiona-hill/the-real-reason-putin-supports-assad?nocache=1>.

¹⁵ See: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/russia-s-security-council-warns-of-islamic-state-fighters-from-former-soviet-union/507921.html>

¹⁶ This I point is important as there is an indirect but strong link between Russian presence in the Middle East (and eliminating radical Islamists there) and central Asia. CA it is the key for the geopolitical and resources strategy of Russia and China that would risk to be destabilized by the spreading of radicalism in Central Asia within what many call “incomplete states” where institutional destabilization is fairly easy to stir. Some Russian analysts seem to support the notion that situation of Syria (radical, religious based uprising) is likely to be repeated in Central Asia in the foreseeable future. China and Russia made a strategic deal, establishing that China would provide the Central Asian countries with all the necessary services (common goods such roads, railways etc.) and have access to local markets, while Russia would be responsible for the security umbrella in the region and institutional stabilization of local regimes. Its radicalization would mean the end of Russian central asset and China would consider to leave this game or change it not in Russian favor.

¹⁷ Among others :<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.677075>

¹⁸ See : on new military hardware : <http://rg.ru/2016/01/21/bastion-site.html>; on tanks T-90 : <http://rg.ru/2016/02/03/reg-urfo/uvz-iran-vypusk-t-90.html>

¹⁹ That might be enhanced by proposed “free trade zone” between Russia and Iran :<http://rg.ru/2016/03/14/novak-rossiia-izuchaet-vopros-vvedeniia-rezhima-svobodnoj-torgovli-s-iranom.html>

²⁰ To remedy that see plans to cooperate in the banking sector :<http://rg.ru/2015/01/27/schet-site-anons.html>

²¹ See: <http://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2016/02/02/989303/no-downturn-in-iran-russia-strategic-ties-velayati-says>

²² Compare :<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/Why-Putins-Policy-in-Syria-Has-Laid-the-Groundwork-for-a-Political-Settlement-18052>

²³ See: <http://rg.ru/2016/02/24/putin-obsudil-s-ruhani-voprosy-peremiriia-v-sirii.html>

²⁴ Putin made it clear to Netanyahu that Russia will not do anything to harm Israel. He added that despite the close relationship between Israel and the US - with whom Russia's relationship is strained - Russia would nonetheless stand by Israel's side and offer aid in the event of a conflict against it, according to the <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/175364#.VxOmuqTmr4c>

²⁵ See: <http://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2012/11/05/lavrov-meets-morsy-brahimi-and-el-araby-in-cairo/>

²⁶ See: <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Sisi-seeks-to-strengthen-cooperation-with-Russia-Putin-402605>

²⁷ See: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/08/putin-sisi-pledge-boost-russia-egypt-ties-150826201113441.html>

²⁸ In the interview new (2015) Russian Ambassador Alexander Shein described them “Since I came to your beautiful and hospitable country [...] I have been feeling a great deal of friendship and cooperation [in] ties connecting our two peoples and states. A clear testimony to this fact, which I have seen myself by now, is an intensive bilateral exchange on official, human and business levels.” <http://www.jpost.com/Diplomatic-Conference/Russias-logic-432865>

²⁹ Please note – however - that the modern history of the Israeli-Russian relationship also have been complicated. Despite that Soviet Union supported the creation of Israel in 1948 then supported politically and militarily the Arab world in the early 1960s and even threatened to attack Israel in both the 1967 Six Day War and 1973 Yom Kippur War.

³⁰ See: http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Human_Rights/98sens.html

³¹ <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4793886,00.html>

³² Russian Ambassador in Israel : “As for the relationship between President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, it is marked by a substantive, regular and – importantly – a trusting dialogue. Such a dialogue makes it possible to forge a mutual understanding so necessary in this difficult time. Besides, it gives a powerful impetus to the further strengthening of the relations on a wide range of issues.” <http://www.jpost.com/Diplomatic-Conference/Russias-logic-432865>

³³ YakovRavkin : http://archives.cerium.ca/IMG/pdf/Yakov_200.pdfRUSSIA AND ISRAEL

³⁴ “Given the United States’ strong opposition to Putin’s move on Crimea, Israel’s willingness to defy its closest ally indicates the extent to which Israeli leaders seek to maintain a good relationship with Putin.” <http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Netanyahu-Putin-and-their-so-called-chemistry-332574>

³⁵ In 2014 V. Putin was one of the few world leaders to support Israel’s Operation Protective Edge against Hamas, saying “I support Israel’s battle that is intended to keep its citizens protected.”

³⁶ “ Netanyahu stressed to Putin that threats to disarm Israel of its nuclear weapons - which have never been officially confirmed by Israeli officials but are widely thought to be in Israel's possession - would harm Israel's interests in the Middle East. Putin, surprisingly, agreed to the proposal. "Russia will block efforts to convene the nuclear arms conference,"he allegedly promised Netanyahu” <http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Netanyahu-Putin-and-their-so-called-chemistry-332574>

³⁷Israeli Air Force has not hesitated to enforce its policy striking weapons convoys in Syria destined for Hezbollah numerous times since the start of the Syrian war; <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4526082,00.html>

³⁸ See: <http://www.spa.gov.sa/viewstory.php?newsid=1373662>