



مركز حرمون  
للدراسات المعاصرة  
**Harmoon Center**  
For Contemporary Studies

## Is Iran a Russian Ally or an Opportunist?

**Policy Studying Unit**

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FOR CONTEMPORARY STUDIES

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## Contents

Introduction .....	2
First: Aleppo, the aim and the end .....	2
Second: challenge or obstinacy? .....	3
Third: expanding influence .....	5
Fourth: Old new question.....	6
Fifth: Mixed War .....	7
Sixth: Two contradicting projects.....	8
Seventh: Current standards.....	9

## Introduction

For years, Syria proved to be the deadliest ground used by Iran to put pressure on the international community in its negotiations on the nuclear issue, and the Assad's regime was one of the most important tools for that. It is only natural for Iran to cling to the regime and not give it up, especially after experiencing the effectiveness of this tool to keep the unrest going on in the region, and the Arab world in general.

## First: Aleppo, the aim and the end

In the Turkish capital Ankara, in the second half of last November, a meeting between the leaders of the opposition factions in Aleppo and Russian officials was held to discuss a (Turkish-Russian) plan, starting with a truce proposal, followed by a "Self-management" of the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo. Syrian opposition sources confirmed that Russia initially agreed to discuss this proposal, as well as the armed opposition, since this proposal may present a most needed gap in the existing dead end, through which what's left of the eastern section of the besieged city could be saved, and spare the city further destruction. But military leaders who participated in this meeting, stressed that Iran was pressing by all means and with their own special methods, to derail the agreement between the Russians and the Syrian armed opposition in eastern Aleppo, and they succeeded in that.

The meeting was held about ten days after the Kremlin's announcement of excluding the city of Aleppo from the extensive bombing operations that were carried out against the city, under the pretext of destroying weapons and ammunition depots, and locations of "Fateh Al-sham Front" and its camps, and their supporters.

The Iranian disruption attempts suggest a conflict of objectives between Russia and Iran and their interests in Aleppo and its environs. In the wider picture, it leads us to presuppose the existence of a conflict between Russia's and Iran's strategy in Syria and the overall difference in their objectives, despite military coordination between them, and declared satisfaction of each other's practices boundaries and influence. Although they share indisputable interests, on top of their attitude towards the fate of their Syrian regime ally,

President Bashar al-Assad, and their desire to form a broad front that could hold out in the face of the regional and international powers supporting the opposition and rejecting the Syrian regime, the partial or total differences between Tehran and Moscow on the Syrian territory are complicating the scene, opening the doors for possibilities that could make things worse.

## **Second: challenge or obstinacy?**

On 26 November, the head of Iran's Chiefs of Staff, Major General Mohammad Bagheri said that Iran needed naval bases in remote areas, and might be setting up bases in Syria or Yemen, confirming that this issues should be considered seriously, because the availability of naval bases would be "ten times more important than nuclear technology". This statement can be added to a series of previous statements of a number of Iranian officials, revealing the dimensions of the Iranian ambitions in the region, and in Syria in particular.

Three days before, on November 23, Mohammad Reza Naqdi, commander of the auxiliary forces (Basij) of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, revealed that Hussein Hamdani, a commander in this military institution, who was killed by the Syrian opposition in the fronts of Aleppo last year, had consulted him in the first months of the beginning of the revolution against Al-Assad's regime on the establishment of auxiliary forces (Basij) in Syria, and told the Iranian "Asharg Newspaper" that they have already been established in accordance with the so-called Syrian name (Shabiha/thugs), a militia similar to the forces (Basij) in Iran's Revolutionary Guards, known to suppress any movement against AlKhamenei inside the country, and he said that the Syrian regime did not express any opinion in the beginning, but after witnessing what the "victories" these militias could achieve, the Syrian regime welcomed the move and agreed to expand them. The general stressed that the military "victories" in Syria against the opposition began with the formation of the Syrian (Basij) militia, noting that the Assad regime stipulated at the outset that these forces should be only from Alawaite sect, but shortly after, he agreed to the formation of other battalions comprising elements of other communities in Syria. The Russian did not react to Naqdi's announcement, in spite of its gravity.

Few days earlier, on 13 November, Hezbollah, an Iranian associated Lebanese militia, organised a military parade in ALqussair in Homs, which was attended by Chairman of the Executive Council of the party, Hashem Safi al-Din, as well as Iranian military leaders whose names were not declared. The party posted pictures of his militia showing off heavy military vehicles, including field guns, tanks, vehicles and vehicles carrying heavy shells, and claimed that the show happened to celebrate (Martyr's Day) which is annually celebrated by the party. It is the first time that the party shows off its power in Syria in this highlighted way, and the first time it also says that it has turned from forces and militias into a whole army, confirming how the party has changed the level of its military tone, after constantly denying participating in the Syrian war since 2012, before his fighters began to return to their villages in Lebanon in body bags.

This show could be considered as a message from the party that it would stay in Syria, with its massive army which exceeded the Syrian army in capabilities, equipment and training, thwarting the "Syrian sovereignty" in the drain. Although it had put its ally Damascus in an awkward position, and despite the seriousness of the military and strategic event, the Russians still remained silent, and made no comment on the show and the enticing statements that accompanied that.

Few weeks earlier, on 29 October, Ahmed al-Asadi, a spokesman for the popular crowd, (Pro-Iran Shiite militias fighting alongside the Iraqi army), announced that after the liberation of the entire territory of Iraq of "terrorist gangs", the offensives will be extended to Syria , stressing that the Shiite militias will enter deeply into Syria to fight with Assad's forces after the end of the battle of Mosul, under the pretext of the fight against "terrorist organizations," which is the term the Assad regime and its allies use to describe extremist takfiri organizations, such as the organization of the Islamic state, and similarly the Syrian armed opposition factions, and still no reaction from Russia.

### **Third: expanding influence**

The political and military influence of Iran in Syria did not change, neither quantitatively nor qualitatively. In addition to Tehran's confessions on 22 November, by Muhammad Ali Shahidi Mahallati (Head of the Martyrs Foundation and Veterans in Iran) that the number of dead Iranian members of armed militias fighting in Syria's ongoing conflict "exceeded thousand people", Iran did not hide the existence of thousands of military and mercenaries from Iran and other countries, in Syria, to confirm their ability to do what they wanted to do in this country.

In this context, the number of people fighting for the interest of Iran in Syria remains unknown. In addition to hundreds of generals from the Revolutionary Guards commanders, who are described as "military advisers", there are tens of thousands of fighters who were recruited by Iran from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and even from Africa, to strengthen its military hegemony under the pretext of supporting the Assad regime, and it calls them the "defenders of the shrines" referring to the Shiite holy shrines in Syria. The most prominent of these militias is "Fatimion" Brigade which includes Afghan fighters sent from Iran, and "Zainabion," brigade which includes Pakistani fighters, the brigade of "Abou El Fadl Abbas," which includes Iraqi fighters, and "the Vanguard of Saraya al-Khorasani," which includes mixed formations.

With the lack of an accurate count of the number of Shiite fighters taking instructions from Iran, they are estimated by some observatories to be 66 militias, some estimations indicate that the number of Iraqi militia fighters is approximately 20 thousand fighters, and the number of the Lebanese Hezbollah's fighters exceeds 10 thousand fighters, and the same number of Afghan and Pakistani fighters, and an unspecified number of officers and soldiers of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and the Basij.

These forces, militias and mercenaries who were exported, and still being exported by Iran to Syria, strongly confirm what the former Minister of the Iranian intelligence, Ali repairmen, had said last year in his statements, that the Iranian revolution "has no boundaries", and the

statements of the Iranian president minorities adviser, Yonsei Ali, who said that Iran "has returned to be the empire it was throughout history and its capital was Baghdad now."

#### **Fourth: Old new question**

Since 2015, Arab and Western reports confirmed that Iran's political influence in Syria was on the wane in exchange for the expansion of Russian influence, indicating that the influence of Iran's military began to retreat with the expansion of the Russian military influence, and even some of them confirmed at the time that Iran began withdrawing some elite officers of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards from Syria, under Russian orders or pressure, and assumed the existence of a real crack in the relationship between the key allies of the Syrian regime.

However, all the facts on the ground suggest otherwise. Iranian forces are continuing to arrive to Syria to participate in the war waged by the Assad regime against its opponents, and Iraqis and Lebanese fighters and Afghan and Pakistani Shiites loyal to Iran are continuing to flow, turning Syria into a compound of tens of thousands of followers of Iran and fighters committed to its command, and who are all subject to a military administration that is purely Iranian, and has nothing to do with Russia, and not even the Syrian regime.

The Syrians views are divided between those who see a decline in the Iranian role, especially after the Russian direct military intervention in the Syrian war, and those who see absolutely non-validity in this hypothesis, and underline the irreversibility of Iranian influence, and emphasize the absence of the Russian decision to end Iran's influence in the Middle East as something that is very important for Russia, which it is supposedly seeking to overtake solely. The question remains how low, or high, is the level of the Iranian interference in Syria, after the Russian direct military intervention, with no clear answer available in the moment.

## **Fifth: Mixed War**

The Assad regime has turned the revolution into a mixed war, or more accurately, to several overlapping wars; a Russian one to regain international influence that had been lost after "Perestroika" and the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dominance of mafias' arms and money on the Russian political decision, an Iranian war with unmistakable national Persian dimension, for what is known as the "Shiite crescent," which opens a "corridor" from Tehran up the Mediterranean, dominating a strategic geographic area in the middle of the ancient world, with all its human, economic and military importance. A third war between the countries of the region, who seek to have a controlling regional role in the region, and a fourth US war, ostensibly against global terrorism and its branching organisations, but in reality the aim is weakening all the previously mentioned powers in the region, giving Israel a safer and more secure environment, as well as the main war carried out by the regime against the opposition, who reject its corruption and sectarianism and discrimination and prosecution practiced for five decades by a very tight security machine.

In these wars, the most esoteric practice was the Iranian, it has exercised an approach which resembled religious dissimulation to pass political and military projects. Russia's goal was clear and public. The same could be said about the US's goal. Only Iran has worked to pass its national goals on a dogmatic plate, and always practiced secretly contrary to what it did publicly, and its claims proved to be false, ranging from confirmed its non-support the Assad's regime, denying the existence of military support, and later denying having any links to the unrestrained sectarian militias, all of which been proved to be false and the furthest from the truth.

Sectarian charging policies and disguised practices by Iran in Syria, arise to the level of crimes against humanity in the eyes of international law, at the same time have facilitated the tasks of IS for free, giving an impression at different points of the existence of coordination between them. Wherever the Islamic State organization spread by force, the armed opposition factions would lose battle, while the Assad regime forces would withdraw easily without a fight, and then the organization would decide to leave after a while leaving the arena to be filled by a militia subsidiary to Iran, Iraq, Afghan, or Lebanese, who would remain the decision

maker, not the regime nor the Russians. The (militias) has also clearly changed the demography, which created some kind of military conflict, prompting the Russians to intervene militarily directly in Syria in September 2015.

## **Sixth: Two contradicting projects**

Some assumptions say that Russian intervention in Syria was a response to an Iranian request, specifically, at a time when neither the Iranians nor the regime could control the military field on the ground, and despite all Iranian financial, political and military investment, the Russian intervention was necessary to provide political cover for all the sectarian militias linked to Iran and in the Syrian arena. This hypothesis is compatible with another hypothesis confirming that the Iranian project is a wholesome one, if disintegrated at one point; it would crumble down in whole, and for this reason, and because Iran's investment in the "Shiite crescent" project exceeded its investments in any other project, Iran was ready to cooperate with whoever could prevent the collapse or failure of the ultimate project.

But Russian strategy, since the decision for a direct military intervention in Syria was taken, differs from the Iranian strategy, as Russia tried to deal with the Syrian issue in terms of being a major force seeking to become a superpower, and regaining its influence in the eastern Mediterranean area which has been lost in Libya, Yemen and the Gulf, while Iran's strategy continued to depend on silent expansion and infiltration, slow sabotage and destruction, murder, deportation and demographic change, a strategy that may not appeal to the Russians because it could leave them in an indispensable mess.

The Russian vision depends on controlling the army, and rehabilitating it, especially after Russia touched how worn out this army was, and made a great effort in training and saving what could be saved, and restore discipline, having turned into a militia in its military and field performance on the ground. Russians relied on some Syrian military leaders -loyal to some extent to Russia- after succeeding in imposing a change in the command of the Republican Guards, and relatively intervening in the structure of the President's bodyguards. In addition to that it is claimed that Russia supported the formation of ( the Fifth Corps) from soldiers and

former combatants and civilians, desiring to reintegrate the Syrian militias loyal to the regime and financed by Iran to be converted into a single block that could be controlled, and in order to get rid of other Iranian and Afghan militias, and an alternative to bypass the state of depreciation for the remainder of the army, the thing Iran sought to obstruct and sabotage in many ways, because eliminating its militias meant the elimination of its project in Syria, consequently the full destruction of the Iranian project in the Middle East.

## **Seventh: Current standards**

Russian tactics in Syria conflicted with Iranian tactics; Russia has decided to exclude the city of Aleppo from the extensive bombing operations that were carried out, and then decided to negotiate with the armed opposition in the city on the Turkish plan for a truce followed by "self-management" of the neighbourhoods of eastern Aleppo, as they have come to realize that the Syrian regime did not possess adequate military forces to enter and control the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo, which meant that the fall of the east of Aleppo and the defeat of the armed opposition would widely open the doors to the Iranian militias, and their affiliates, to storm the city and dominate it, something that was not compatible with the Russia strategy. So, it decided apparently to sharpen their tools to work on the normalization of the situation in the east of Aleppo, pulling back from the raid, and pouring the proposal of the UN envoy Staffan de Mistora in this context, demanding to recognize the self-management of the opposition in eastern Aleppo in exchange with extracting the militants of the extremist groups, a proposal which was rejected by the Syrian regime immediately in line with Iran's desire.

Iran is aware that its role in Syria is at risk of being scaled down, especially by the Russians, prompting it to announce its willingness to send about one hundred thousand of its (Basij) forces who were waiting for directives from their Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, as well as the declaration of the popular crowd official in Iraq, about his intention to go to Syria after the end battle of Mosul in support of the Syrian regime in its "holy" battle, and Iran announcing its intention to build military bases in Syria, and bragging of "Hezbollah's Army" in the Qussair,

since it is not easy for Iran to give up or agree to limit its future role in Syria, or waiver for this part of its National Persian expansion project.

It is clear that the Russian-Iranian agreement is only a cover of real and fundamental differences between the two parties, which are most visible in the Syrian arena, and threatening to emerge into the open. But both sides are working to hide them, as it would weaken both if something like this came into light, if so, it is more likely that Russia would be the one impose its project, by force or otherwise, Russia would have to consider Iran's influence in Syria, but that is all, and even at that, some differences may occur in determining the type and quantity of this influence.

For years, Syria proved to be the deadliest ground used by Iran to put pressure on the international community in its negotiations on the nuclear issue, and the Assad's regime was one of the most important tools for that. It is only natural for Iran to cling to the regime and not give it up, especially after experiencing the effectiveness of this tool to keep the unrest going on in the region, and the Arab world in general. It is sure that Iran is bargaining on Assad's insecurity towards Russia, and the possibility that they may give him up at later stages.

So far, there is no introductions or signs suggesting that Iran will take a positive attitude from the Russian long-term strategy in Syria, on the contrary, what is happening is that Assad and Iran have a sense that holding all "dirty" tools in their hands, including 66 constituted sectarian fighters groups allied to Iran, is the only way to strengthen their status, compared to the Russian plan, which refuses to share the decisions of the military operations room with anyone, ultimately leading to political change, and the alliance of Assad-Khamenei will remain part of the sectarian Persian project, and it is the only way for the survival of Assad in power, political battles are expected to be witnessed between the Russian and Iranian, theoretically similar to the actual battles taking place on the ground between them and the Syrian armed opposition.





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