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How Deep are the Cracks in the Russian-Iranian Coalition in Syria?

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Recent developments in the international arena and on the battlefield in Syria invite some perspective on the stability of the Russian-Iranian coalition formed in September 2015. It appears that after three months of military effort, Russia's involvement in Syria has not produced the results Moscow anticipated. Russia made a strategic decision to intervene militarily in the civil war in Syria in order to defend the regime of Bashar al-Assad. This decision was based on Russia's interests in the Middle East and elsewhere, headed by the desire to expand Russia's regional influence, preserve a naval foothold on the Mediterranean shore, and to challenge the overriding standing of the United States in the Middle East. A "natural" coalition of Assad's allies formed in Syria, comprising Russia, Iran, the Syrian army, Hezbollah, and Shiite militias operating as Iranian proxies. Despite the Russian statements that its military involvement in Syria was aimed primarily at combating the Islamic State, most of Russia's attacks were designed to help the al-Assad regime, with airstrikes targeting rebel organizations and air support for Assad's allies fighting on the ground. It now appears that after months of air-land military effort by the Russian-Iranian coalition, the integrated attack, which focused on gaining control of essential territory in northern Syria (the Aleppo area, the Aleppo-Homs artery, and the passages to the coastal sector) has been halted. As a result, friction and conflicts of interest have surfaced between the pro-Assad coalition members, and political disputes have added to the military difficulties. Russian President Vladimir Putin has attempted to exploit the military intervention to forge an international framework to devise a political roadmap for ending the civil war in Syria. The diplomatic measures, however, have also bogged down. Moreover, the agreement between the major powers, specifically between Russia and the United States, to launch a political process that will shape a future settlement in Syria including the regime's future was not regarded favorably by Iran.

Russia-Iran: Between the Strategic Connection and Political and Military Disputes

Despite a history of strategic rivalry, Russia and Iran have found common ground since the founding of the Islamic Republic. Russia has aided Iran in various spheres, including the military and nuclear realms. This multi-faceted cooperation has continued,

notwithstanding the Russian participation in recent years in the sanctions regime against Iran and its active role in the negotiations on the nuclear question. Russia profited from this policy – wielding international political influence on the one hand, and exploiting economic opportunities with Iran on the other. The need to bolster the tottering Assad regime in Syria highlighted the confluence of Iranian and Russian interests. This aid likewise became an essential tool in promoting Russia's strategic goals – both combating radical (Salafi jihadist) Islam, which threatens Russia, and shaping a regional settlement to Russia's liking. Nonetheless, the common ground did not obliterate the disputes between the two countries. The question of Assad's personal future – Russia is flexible on this point while promoting a negotiated settlement with the international community on a political transition in Syria – is only one such bone of contention. Indeed, each side takes a different view of its main goals in Syria.

The main purpose of Iran's intervention in the fighting in Syria is to design a future settlement that advances its needs. Specifically, a strengthened Shiite Iran-Iraq-Syria-Hezbollah axis requires the preservation of the Alawite regime and the guarantee of its pro-Iranian orientation. This is the key element in Iran's current regional strategy, which aims at regional hegemony by forming a sphere of influence under its leadership while thwarting other actors – be they regional (mainly Saudi Arabia and Turkey) or international (the West) – that strive to promote a different settlement.

For its part, Russia has other interests, and its intervention in Syria serves its global objectives. Its preferred goal is a settlement that will give it a foothold and facilitate its influence in the Middle East, while putting an end to Western dominance in the region. Preserving the al-Assad regime is not a required condition, provided that Moscow's status in Syria is maintained, and thus Russia is fairly flexible in its negotiations with the West on this point. Russia also fears Iranian "defection" to the Western camp, following the nuclear agreement and given the coordination with the United States on the situation in Iraq, and even in Syria, against the Islamic State. Tehran is not happy with Russia's strengthened foothold in Syria, which could eventually disrupt its plans on two levels. On the political level, Iran finds it hard to accept Russia's preference to enlist the West and the Sunni states in the effort to stabilize Syria and design a political settlement there. Furthermore, in the political talks, Russia is completely ignoring Iran's status. Russia has succeeded in leading the political process in two rounds of meetings in Vienna and in drafting a Security Council resolution to outline a roadmap for dialogue and transitional arrangements in Syria to end the war and achieve a solution within 18 months. However, in addition to the difficulty encountered by Russia in enlisting cooperation from the Syrian rebel factions, it appears that the West, led by the United States, is also unenthusiastic about facilitating Russia's leading role, and is certainly reluctant to facilitate Putin's political success, which presumes that military intervention in Syria would also bring political dividends. At the same time, however, Russia succeeded in

taking the leading role in the political process only after it demonstrated its determination through the use of military force.

The second problematic level is military. Russia's coalition partners include not only Iranian forces and the Syrian army loyal to Assad, but also Shiite militias and Hezbollah, which are under Iranian influence. Russia's coolness toward the latter groups has prompted complaints from Iran about partial cooperation from Russia. For the integrated offensive effort, Iran sent 2,000 of its Revolutionary Guards ground troops – the al-Quds force – as reinforcements (in addition to the force that was previously fighting alongside Bashar), as well as volunteer Shiite militias and Hezbollah forces. The successful defense by the rebel forces and the number of losses among the al-Quds force commanders and soldiers, however, have aroused criticism in Iran itself about the resources devoted to Syria, and Iran has now withdrawn its reinforcements.

Israel's Position in the Situation

A related element is Russian-Israeli cooperation, which detracts from the trust between Iran and Russia, and complicates the Iranian attempt, in coordination with Hezbollah, to establish an infrastructure in southern Syria for terrorist operations against Israel in the Golan Heights area. Some of the coordination between Israel and Russia in Syria seems to involve Israeli freedom of action in Syrian and Lebanese airspace (even though the area is covered by Russian surface-to-air missile batteries). Indeed, Israel has taken care to maintain its freedom of action in countering what it defines as a concrete threat against it. Thus far, in what should not be taken for granted, Israel has managed to sustain its aerial coordination with Russia. The recent action in Syria attributed to Israel, however – the killing of Samir Kuntar in the outskirts of Damascus – has aroused the fury of Hezbollah and Iran. From their perspective, this operation involved understandings between Israel and Russia that are taking precedence over Russia's commitments to the pro-Assad coalition. If the appearance of stepped-up Russian-Israeli coordination indeed reflects strategic coordination, it will undoubtedly give rise to second thoughts in the Russian coalition about the validity of the partnership, while at the same time enhancing the Israeli interest to coordinate with Russia while avoiding possible areas of friction with the Russian forces operating in Syria.

Yet regardless of these points of contention, and despite the efforts of the Western powers and Sunni Arab countries to puncture the Russian-led coalition, the pro-Assad partnership is still a long way from dissolution. The upheavals in the Middle East have created new partnerships and coalitions limited in objectives and time. Just as NATO member Turkey can maintain relations with the Islamic State, while the United States proclaims that the war against the Islamic State is the principal American effort, Russia can lead a coalition in partnership with Iran and Hezbollah, while at the same time maintaining strategic understandings with Israel. Iran has no option for an exit from the

game in Syria, and will therefore prefer continued cooperation with Russia, even if it sometimes leaves a sour taste. Furthermore, by persisting in this cooperation, Iran avoids leaving Russia to build the foundations of a settlement in Syria by itself, at the expense of Iranian interests in Syria and elsewhere in the region.

