

HH Sheikh Nasser
al-Mohammad al-Sabah
Publication Series

Comparative analysis of security policies of Iran and
Russia in the Middle East (2012-2019)

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Number 34: October 2021



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Introduction

The role that Iran and Russia play on the international arena is often contested. Still, one cannot deny their involvement as active actors in many contemporary crisis situations. Thus, they are actively presented in the Middle East region. Endowed with an exceptional potential in natural resources, the two countries face immense challenges and difficulties particularly in the field of economy and strategy. Their adversaries are as numerous as they are powerful, and include their common rival, the United States.

In this regard, it can be said that the changes about the positioning of global and regional powers in the Middle East have rekindled interest in realist analyses of the international relations of the region and specifically on balance of power theory. Debates about ‘bandwagoning’, ‘balancing’ and ‘hedging’ have always exercised analysts of the international relations of the Middle East, and this has been given a fillip recently.¹ Alliances are most commonly viewed as a response to threats, yet there is sharp disagreement as to what that response will be. When entering an alliance, states may either balance (ally in opposition to the principal

source of danger) or bandwagon (ally with the state that poses the major threat). These contrasting hypotheses depict very different worlds, and the policies that follow from each are equally distinct.² Balancing and bandwagoning are usually framed solely in terms of power. Balancing is alignment with the weaker side; bandwagoning means to choose the stronger. This view is seriously flawed, however, because it ignores the other factors that statesmen consider when identifying potential threats and prospective allies. Although power is an important factor in their calculations, it is not the only one. Rather than allying in response to power alone, it is more accurate to say that states will ally with or against the most threatening power. For example, states may balance by allying with other strong states, if a weaker power is more dangerous for other reasons. Because balancing and bandwagoning are more accurately viewed as a response to threats, it is important to consider all the factors that can affect the level of threat that states may pose.³

Cooperation between Iran and Russia in addressing security threats - a common understanding of threats such as confrontation with threatening governmental and non-governmental actors, extremism, and

separatism - could lead the two countries to strategic cooperation.

The international security environment is so favourable that Russia can freely choose between balancing and bandwagoning. Russia initiated and soon abandoned its bandwagoning attitude toward the United States shortly after the September 11 attacks in 2011. It currently seems to be neither an ally nor an enemy of the United States. However, the convergence of Russia and China in their strategic position will potentially impact on the international security structure, as both Russia and China clearly aspire to be superpowers in the long run. This constellation promotes Russia's policy of confronting the United States and cooperating with China for the time being.⁴

As for the Middle East region, Russia seems to be prioritising a dual policy of balancing with most countries in the region and cooperating with Iran. Russia intends to cooperate with Iran in some areas in line with its interests, but not until this cooperation leads to the destruction of Russia's security relations with other countries in the region. So long as Iran steps in the direction of Russia's regional interests - as well as pursuing a policy of engagement with China and sometimes the United States in the international arena - it will support and accompany Iran in the region.

Theoretical Framework

Defensive realism is a structural theory derived from the school of realism theory and it finds its foundation in Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, in which Waltz argues that the anarchical structure of the international system encourages states to maintain moderate and reserved policies to attain security. Defensive realism asserts that aggressive expansion as promoted by offensive realists upsets the tendency of states to conform to the balance of power theory, thereby decreasing the primary objective of the state, which, they argue, ensure its security. In this understanding, offensive realists assume that policymakers start with a perception, which causes a concrete policy that has concrete effects - war, building of alliances, gathering of more resources - while defensive realists assume that policymakers create policies that, both, create concrete effects and are meant to create perceptions.⁵

While defensive realism encourages states to maintain moderate and reserved policies in order to attain security and its basic principle is "security maximization" and "protecting own power", the offensive realism it is a system in which the state seeks to maximise power and influence in order to achieve security through domination and

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hegemony and its basic principle is “power maximization” and “projecting own power”.⁶ The security dilemma is arguably the theoretical linchpin of defensive realism, because for defensive realists it is the security dilemma that makes possible genuine cooperation between states— beyond a fleeting alliance in the face of a common foe. For offensive realists, the security dilemma makes war inevitable and rational.⁷ Departing from offensive realism’s strict focus on the distribution of power, defensive realism argues that the offence-defence balance significantly affects the degree of insecurity states face. A strong offensive advantage makes conquest comparatively easy, increases the likelihood of aggressive behaviour, and intensifies the security dilemma between states. Conversely, a strong defensive advantage makes conquest more difficult and leaves states more secure. Defensive realists maintain that a state’s security policies are determined in part by its assessment of others’ intentions and motives.⁸

The present study, based on the theory of defence balance, seeks to examine the security policies of Iran and Russia in the Middle East. It seems that the goal of the two countries now is to maximise security, not power. Although the two countries have engaged in security-military activities to expand their power in the

region (from peace cooperation to interventionist measures), the current situation and the reliance on multilateral and flexible diplomacy in both countries have made it their priority to maintain their positions and defend their security gains. To this end, the two countries have taken steps to work together and carefully coordinate their positions. However, depending on their national priorities and interests, they sometimes move towards balancing and sometimes towards bandwagon in. Offensive realists consider states need power for surviving, which is expansionist and aggressive foreign policy; whereas defensive realists believe states should do balance/bandwagoning for surviving against a threatening state.⁹

On one hand, the Kremlin’s foreign policies conform to the expectations of defensive realism. A defensive realist foreign policy prioritises state security, which is maximised when a stable balance of power is established in the international system. Defensive realists advise against imperialism and aggression, but they do advocate power projection by threatened states to the extent that is necessary to restore the international system to a stable state of equilibrium.¹⁰

On the other hand, Iran’s regional policy in Middle East also has characteristics that show its realism. As Von Rennenkampff

writes in the US Congress-affiliated Hill magazine, the Iranian people view Tehran's limited military support of Syria and Iraq not as a domineering effort of the Islamic Republic, but as a vital deterrent against enemies armed to the teeth by the US. For this reason, the Institute for Middle East Studies points out that Iranian military commanders are trying to pursue a "defensive front" strategy to weaken US options while expanding Iranian influence.¹¹

Iran's foreign policy and its basic principles

Iran's foreign policy is the product of many, and sometimes competing, factors: the ideology of Iran's Islamic revolution; Iranian leadership's perception of threats to the regime and to the country; long-standing Iranian national interests; and the interaction of the Iranian regime's various factions and constituencies. Some experts assert that the goal of Iran's foreign policy is to overturn a power structure in the Middle East that Iran asserts favours the United States and its allies Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Sunni Muslim Arab regimes. Iran characterises its support for Shiite and other Islamist movements as support for the "oppressed" and asserts that Saudi Arabia, in particular, is instigating

sectarian tensions and trying to exclude Iran from regional affairs. Others interpret Iran's foreign policy as primarily an attempt to protect Iran from U.S. or other efforts to invade or intimidate Iran or to change its regime. From 2010 until 2016, Iran's foreign policy also focused on attempting to mitigate the effects of international sanctions on Iran. Iran employs a number of different tools in pursuing its foreign policy.¹² Iran's foreign policy often appears to reflect differing approaches and outlooks among key players and interest groups. Supreme Leader Khamenei dominate several decision-making and advisory councils as well as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC is the military and internal security force created after the Islamic revolution, and it is the Al-Quds Force provides support to regional armed factions and allied governments. More moderate Iranian leaders, including President Hassan Rouhani, argue that a pragmatic foreign policy helps Iran build outside support for Iran's positions. It is difficult to assess the relationship between public opinion and Iranian foreign policy.¹³

In order to gain better understating of Iran, it is important to analyse its foreign policy. First, this is the way to understand the relationship between religion and politics inside the Islamic Republic of Iran, and

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second, it is important to assess the impact of Iranian foreign policy on Middle Eastern and international security. According to the Islamic Republic of Iran's Constitution, the country's foreign policy "is crafted to four fundamental principles: first, rejection of all forms of external domination; second, preservation of Iran's independence and territorial integrity; third, defence of the rights of all Muslims without allying with hegemonic powers; and fourth, the maintenance of

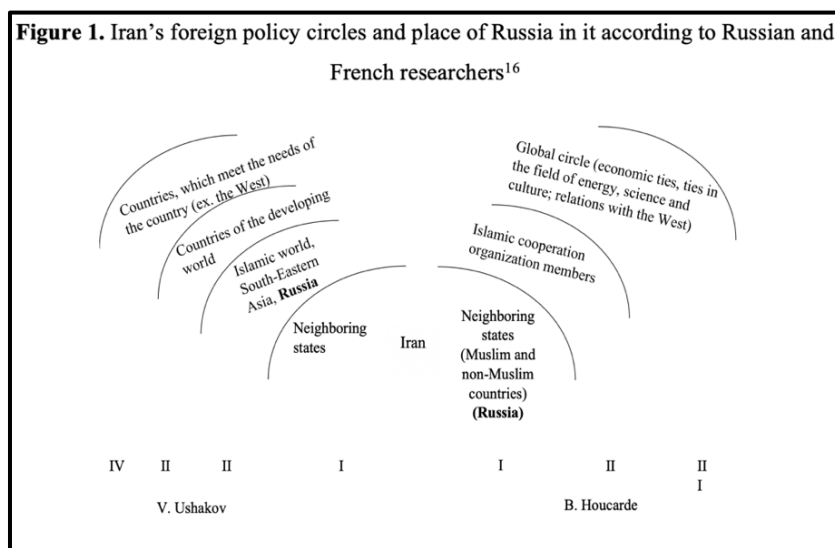
peaceful relations with all non-belligerent states".¹⁴

It is also necessary to take into account the combination

and interaction of its geopolitical circles. Depending on the period under review, the value of the ideological stakes (so-called the Islamic circle) was more significant than economic issues, however, issues of a national nature still often dominate. At the same time, Iran's foreign policy concepts should be taken into account, which are four: "Neither East nor West", "Export of revolution", "Mother of cities" (Umm Al-Qur) and "Dialogue of

civilisations". Russian researcher Vyacheslav Ushakov.¹⁵ As well as French researcher Bernard Houcarde.¹⁶ Both place relations with Russia as quite important in first and the second so-called Iran foreign policy circle. For Iran Russia forms part of the neighbouring countries circle, a big country which carries weight in political arena. In addition, even though it is not yet reflected in official documents, analyses of speeches of the leaders show positive estimation of the cooperation.¹⁷

It can be said that, regionally and globally, Iran has been one of the most remarkable international actors. Due to its geopolitical



location, it attracted the attentions of the great powers during the Cold War. By the Islamic Revolution, it had opened a new chapter in its international relations. The foreign policy (FP) perspective of Iran came under scrutiny once again by the nuclear revelations. The Arab Spring wave intensified the role Iran plays in the region, which reached its climax with the Syria crisis. Iran is "a fiercely independent and

defiant player” that wants to be an engaged actor in regional and global politics.¹⁸

The importance of Iran’s role in the Middle East

Iran played an important role in the Middle East throughout history as an imperial power as a key player in clashes between East and West, being one of the largest natural gas producers in the world. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the absence of one of the political forces, it constitutes a very important link between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, as a liaison between fifteen countries. This shows the importance of geo-economic leadership of Iran as a central point for the world’s energy supply, and as a liaison between the market of Central Asia and the Arabian Gulf market, the emergence of geopolitical position of Iran to regional and global coordination are factors to achieve objectives of its foreign policy.¹⁹

Also, worth noticing that since 9/11, the Middle East issues have been the focus of international politics and among the Middle Eastern countries, Iran’s role has also been at the centre of Middle Eastern issues. Iran’s newly significant roles in shaping international politics of the Middle East include:

- 1) Acting as a balancing political force in regional crises such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon.
- 2) Its geopolitical posture in the battle against global terrorism and being situated between the two major bases of global terrorism i.e., Afghanistan and Iraq.
- 3) Its influence among the Shiite factions who are currently at the centre of the Middle East is shifting politics.²⁰

In the Middle East, Iran is seeking to project power to secure its national security and promote its ideology. Iran appears to be using its influence in the region, in part, as a tool to counter the U.S. policy of maximum pressure on Iran. Its primary strategy in the region is to deploy the IRGC-QF to arm, advice, and support allied governments and armed factions in what successive U.S. administrations have called “malign activities”.

The State Department’s 2018 report “Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran’s Destructive Activities” asserts that Iran has spent over \$16 billion since 2012 “propping up the Assad regime and supporting [Iran’s] other partners and proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen”. Still estimates vary widely and are difficult to corroborate, and U.S. government and other sources do not break down or detail

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how those dollar figures were derived. The FY2020 National Defence Authorisation Act (S. 1790, P.L. 116-92) required a Director of National Intelligence report to Congress on Iran's funding for regional armed factions and terrorist groups, Iran's support to proxy forces in Syria and Lebanon, and the threat posed to Israel by Iran and its proxies.²¹

There have always been two significant challenges for Iran in its foreign policy conduct. The first challenge has been regulating relations with the great powers and the larger international community. The Iranian perception of international relations has compelled the country to balance its political, economic, and cultural affinities between East and West. Although many Iranians, especially intellectuals and elites, admire the West and desire to some extent to live, think and act like people in Western nations, there are certain geographical, cultural-societal, religious, and political elements that attach Iran to Oriental traditions. Iran's look towards the Islamic world as well as its "East-look policy" and its efforts to expand relations with Russia and China are derived from this reality. Iran's second foreign policy challenge has been regulating its relations with the Arab world. There are differing perspectives, both idealistic and pragmatist, towards the Arab world within the

Iranian society that affect Iran's foreign policy conduct.²²

Importance of the Middle East for Russia

Historically Russia played an important role in the Middle East. During the second part of XX, century relations with the Arab countries with the Soviet Union contributed to their development. Ideological background and confrontation with the US changed to multiplication of the actors in the region and appearance of new challenges. Rich in natural resources and located in important for the whole world in terms of logistics, the Middle East stays to be one of the most conflicting and unstable regions.

In the modern history of Russia Middle East used to be a region of secondary importance until 2012. Since then, foreign policy has gone through a serious transformation, which can be divided into three periods: 2012 to late 2013, late 2013 to 2015 and 2016 to the present.²³ Little by little by 2013, Russia became more active in the region (especially when it launched its first airstrikes against groups, which were opposing the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad on 30 September 2015).

The Concept on the foreign policy of Russia is the main document, which represents the basic principles, main priorities, goals, and tasks of its foreign policy. Updated in 2016, the document claims to be more detailed than the previous one published in 2013. Thus, it includes a new goal – strengthening the position of Russia as one of the influential centres of the modern world. Building of a multipolar system stays to be one of its priorities since it was declared by V. Putin in Munich in 2007. Russia actively stands for a stabilisation of the situation and neutralisation of threats in the Middle East.²⁴ The document gives a precise position towards two countries in the Middle East – Iran and Syria. According to it, Russia aims develop comprehensive cooperation with the Islamic Republic of Iran and seeks the consistent implementation of a comprehensive agreement on Iran nuclear program. As for Syria, “Russia stands for a political settlement of the situation” in this country. At the same time, Moscow supports “the unity, independence and territorial integrity of the republic as a secular, democratic, pluralistic state”.²⁵

Since the Syrian peace process proved its effectiveness, it is likely to increase the role of Russia and Iran on international arena. Thus, Michael Patrick Mulroy and Eric Oehlerich underline that foreign policy of

Russia in Syria have actually led to substantial benefits for its military posture in the Middle East.²⁶ Moreover, its actions Syria were used as an arena for regional influence. For Iran, it may be seen as a way to increase its regional role and avoid isolation.

Russia aims to legitimise Syria in the frames of the League of the Arab states. Moreover, the government of Russia finds it necessary for the Syrian migrants to come back. First, this can be explained by the necessity of the after-war recovery of the country, which along with investments stay to be one of the most important steps for the potential stability. Russia sees itself as one of the actors who may take part in it. Still there is a lack of capital and technologies, which opens opportunities for such political entities as the EU, UAE, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and China.²⁷

The Syrian crisis represents a geopolitical dimension of regional and global concurrence for influence.²⁸ Thus, this is the only case in modern history of Russia, where this country played with forecasts to expand its zone of influence and challenge the unilateral US policy in the international arena. Russia strives to maintain its relations with other regional countries, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. In October 2017, there was a remarkable visit of Salman bin Abdul-Aziz

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Al Saud, King of Saudi Arabia to Moscow. Within the framework of it, fourteen agreements on cooperation in various fields from space research and energy to telecommunications and culture have been signed.

Besides that, there is a number of economic and military factors, which also represent an interest for Russia, starting from sales of hydrocarbons and ending the military bases, which Russia have in the region. It also plays an important role by selling military equipment to its allies – Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Egypt. By its presence, Russia shows itself as a reliable partner, as for example, for Syria, when the regime of Bashar Al-Assad is supported. In this case, Russia acts as an interlocutor. It has the same role between Israel and Iran. Thus, it supports good relations with different actors of the regional conflicts: Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran et les Kurds, which makes it a valuable partner.²⁹ At the same time such policy can be unfavourable at least in terms of its high financial cost (economic factor) and its' not acceptance/rejection by the international community (political factor).

Relative flexibility of Russian foreign policy in the Middle East allows it to develop relations of many countries of the region. Still, one can consider it quite limited. Thus, Russia

develops relations with Iran, who has hostility with Israel and Saudi Arabia, who are among its partners. Among of Russia's active partners in the region is also Libya, which is sometimes considered as the next battleground of global powers. Thus, 2019 is marked as a year where Russia invested in this country by troops and some material contributions. As was noticed before, Russia aims to re-establish army of Bashar al-Assad since examples of Libya and Iraq have clearly shown the consequences of complete regime destruction to the Russian government³⁰.

Continuation of strategic dialogue with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is a part of regional priorities of the foreign policy.³¹ During the last decade, Russia has become a privilege interlocutor balancing between opposite actors of the region. Thus, French specialist on Syria and minorities, Frédéric Pichon, concludes that Russia has no allies or enemies in the region, but partners.³²

As for the cooperation with other powers, such as the EU, Russia believes that economic sanctions must be lifted. Unlike the EU, which considers that reinforcement of sanctions may force Bashar Al-Assad make concessions on such issues as human rights, chemical weapons, migrants, etc., Russia sees lifting of sanctions as a possible measure.³³ Thus, it considers that mostly population but

not the ruling authorities suffer from sanctions' consequences. In this case, the smartest choice would be implementing a more human policy tool – *smart sanctions*, aiming to target the elite supporters, rather than the mass public.³⁴

Active role and development of relations with new potential partners can be also explained by the search of alternatives created by the western sanctions. For the first time in decades, Russia re-established itself as a crucial player in the politics of the Middle East.³⁵

Russia's international role and its influence in the Middle East

In the frames of its foreign policy, Russia, as one of the actors of an international scale, aims to play a more important role. In addition, if previous meetings held during the two years after a creation of the Astana format, were mostly concentrated around the local conflict resolution, the meeting of the three representatives in 2019 marked a considerable widening of a range of questions from the constitutional committee to the return of refugees and the restoration of Syria. The fact that this committee is proposed to be discussed in Geneva acts as a proof that the Astana format do not represent a separate initiative,

but rather aims to increase its legitimacy, functioning in accordance with the principles of the UN. Considering that multilateralism is both a tool and a value, actually means that Russia uses its power on regional levels in the frames of regional institutions.

According to Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russia Federation, this type of cooperation has three main goals:

- 1) Creation of de-escalation zones with compliance with the regime of military operations.
- 2) Humanitarian assistance with return to peaceful life.
- 3) Political dialogue and political negotiations.³⁶

This tripartite interaction format proves its effectiveness. Thus, acceptance of the Syrian regime by the Turkish government is partly one of the biggest successes of Russia as the results of multiple talks held on Syria. Sochi, as another platform for the Syrian dialogue is nothing but a clear message for the other global powers that from now on nothing in the region can happen without Russia's agreement.

Among other reasons, sending troops to Syria by Russia is explained by protection of spread of instability and radical Islamism in the country itself, as well as in the post-Soviet

space. Especially it concerns the Central Asia region, where buffer countries for Russia are located. Many researchers, among which is Ural Sharipov and Lyudmila Romanova in their article “West and large-scale collisions in the Near and Middle East” come to a conclusion that in XXI century religious radicalism started to appear more often in the Arab states, while before it marked mostly in Iran and partially Iraq in the last decades of the XX century. It is important to underline that Russia is mostly Sunni state. Only 3 percent of population of Russia consider themselves Muslims (about 20 millions of people).³⁷ Historically, Sunni Muslims are in the majority, they mostly live in the Urals and the Volga region. The Shiites predominantly live in the regions of the North Caucasus that are closest to the border.

Areas of convergence and divergence of foreign policy between Iran and Russia

Main goals of Russia and Iran can be seen as truly different. Russia and Iran have a common enemy and these forces these two countries to cooperate, which may be regarded as a situational union, not a strategic one. Moreover, for some researchers as Marianna Arunova, in the XXI century we can talk about

the inevitability of the union and even “doomness” of the neighbourhood.³⁸ Besides, Russia counters on more support from the Iranian side, which could also use its ties with the Shi’a government of Iraq, that is now closer with Iran, rather than with the United States. At the same time, it is obvious that full-fledged operations will certainly lead to the opposition from the monarchies of the Persian Gulf. The Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) experience, when Iraq was supported by the Arab states, as well as difficult social and economic current situation and a large number of victims may cause further discontent with the regime. These factors restrain Iran from a direct (or more explicit) invasion.³⁹ The unprecedented event was when Russia was allowed to use Shahid Nojeh Air Base in Hamedan to send bombers to Syria. It is rare since Iran usually opposes presence of any foreign power on its soil. This can be seen as the perspective of future possible conduction of similar operations by the two countries.

Moscow shares several interests with Tehran. Both oppose American influence in the Middle East. Both fear their internal democratic opponents and believe that America supports them. Both fear Sunni jihadists such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State since these are anti-Russian and anti-Shia, as well as anti-Western and anti-Israeli. Further,

both support the Assad regime in Syria, which is also both anti-American and anti-Sunni jihadist. However, despite these and many other common interests, Moscow also differs with Tehran on several important issues. As was mentioned before Russia (under Putin in particular), has been pursuing good relations with several of Iran's adversaries. In addition to continued Iranian resentment over defeats, interventions, and support for Tehran's adversaries in both the Tsarist and Soviet eras, there have also been several irritants to their relations in the post-Soviet era. These include their inability to agree on how to divide the Caspian Sea (and all the petroleum resources underneath it) ever since the breakup of the Soviet Union, and Iranian dissatisfaction with Russia for its willingness to limit or even cancel both Russian arms sales to and nuclear cooperation with Iran in the past.

While Moscow has claimed that it has succeeded in delaying and weakening Western-sponsored UN Security Council resolutions imposing sanctions on Iran over its nuclear program, Tehran has been resentful towards Russia for having supported these resolutions at all when it could have just vetoed them. These differences between Moscow and Tehran, though, have not impeded Russian – Iranian cooperation. Indeed, the tense relationship usually

prevailing between Tehran and Washington ever since the 1979 Islamic Revolution has provided Moscow with a certain degree of freedom to pursue policies that Tehran disapproves of since Moscow has usually felt secure in the knowledge that Iran would not respond to Russian policies it dislikes by moving closer toward the US. Moscow, though, has feared that reformist Iranian presidents – Khatami and Rouhani – have sought improved Iranian – American relations and that this would lead to diminished Russian influence in Tehran. Moscow was especially fearful that Obama's pursuit of a nuclear accord with Iran would lead to a broader rapprochement between the US and Iran. Iranian – Israeli and Iranian – Saudi/Gulf Arab hostility could well escalate into conflict due to their own dynamics no matter who is president of the US at the moment. The Trump Administration's strong support for Israel and Saudi Arabia as well as its hostility towards Iran suggests that if such conflict does occur, Washington will strongly support its allies against Tehran. If Russia responds by aiding Iran, it stands to lose the good relations it has built with Israel and/or Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies. However, if Moscow tries to remain neutral or promote conflict resolution while fighting is taking place, it risks Washington becoming the primary external

power shaping the conflict as well as feeding latent Iranian fears of Russian betrayal. In other words, increased conflict threatens Moscow's ability to maintain good relations with the opposing sides as it has up to the present.⁴⁰

Since 2015, Iran and Russia became closer due to the Syrian issue. Despite this cooperation with one of the great actors in international arena, union stays asymmetrical in the favour of Moscow. The goals of the two countries that they are pursuing in the Middle East stay different. Due to a number of factors, such as, for example, relative independence from the West, secular nature of government, traditions of bilateral cooperation that have roots from the Soviet era, access to the Mediterranean Sea, Syria was always playing an important role for Russia's policy in the region.⁴¹ Russia's military involvement in Syria after 2015 brought cooperation between the two countries in the region to unprecedented levels. The military-intelligence cooperation has been seen as a success by both sides. The objectives of the cooperation were to defeat ISIS and regain territory in favour of the Assad government, both of which have been achieved.⁴²

Areas of convergence in Syria: Iran and Russia's joint goal is to preserve the Assad regime, at least for now, as a means of

guaranteeing their respective core interests. Assad himself is seen as the guarantor of these interests, and the need to strengthen his position in advance of any potential political negotiations forms an important basis for cooperation. For Iran, as a senior adviser to the government explained, Syria – and importantly the regime – “has instrumental value as a conduit” for supply highways to Hezbollah, Iran's only ally in achieving strategic security depth vis-à-vis Israel and the US. In recent years, Iran and Hezbollah have become increasingly interdependent on the issue of security, and the loss of Syria would significantly weaken their regional position. For Russia, Syria also has instrumental value as its only real outpost in the Middle East. However, Moscow is particularly concerned about the potential for state collapse in Syria, the implications this would have on the chaos already brewing in parts of the Middle East, and the spillover of extremism.⁴³ Russia and Iran have diplomatic presence in the region. Both countries fight terrorism and are interested in both keeping existing relations with the allies as well as creation and development of new ones. Thus, high level of political interaction with Iran can be used in order to increase the role of Russia and its authority in so-called Shi'a crescent.⁴⁴ It is interesting to notice that some researchers,

such as, for example Aleksey Sarabiev, researcher of the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies of the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Science (*RAN, Rossiyskaya Akademiya Nauk*) doubt the real existing of this widely used in academic circles term. Thus, in his article “Shiite arc of the Middle East: a real threat or a geopolitical chimera?” he concludes that there is no clear definition for such a term, presented by the king of Jordan, Abdullah II in 2004.

Moreover, it is usually used in times of exacerbation of anti-Iranian rhetoric and is generally insolvent. It is also worth noticing that according to him, in general conflictogenity do not reach a conflict level

since conflicts of Middle Eastern societies are due to its exclusively external influence, which repeatedly brought the system out of equilibrium.⁴⁵

Areas of divergence in Syria: Despite all this convergence, it is not clear that the end game in Syria necessarily favours closer

Russian Iranian cooperation. The exact longevity of Assad’s presidency is likely to be a sticking point. Iran’s red line has so far been that Assad must remain until at least the end of his presidential term in 2021. While Moscow is similarly opposed to Western-imposed change in Damascus, it has hinted at a political roadmap for Assad’s departure so long as it occurs on its own terms and preserves a regime that is fit to govern and ready to respect Russia’s interests. However, without these pre-conditions, neither Iran nor Russia has been prepared to move on the Assad question. As part of this tension, there has been concern in Iran that Russia could pre-emptively shift from a military to a political track, pushing for

a deal at a point when Assad has not fully consolidated his powerbase. For example, Putin’s announcement on 14 March that Russia

Table 1. Main goals of Russia and Iran in the Middle East. Compiled by authors.

Main goals in the Middle East	
Russia	Iran
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforcement of its role on the international arena; • Strengthening its positions in the region. Reinforcement of its naval base in Syria Tartus (approximately after 2017 Russian official usage started to call it a base and not a material-technical Support Point); • Becoming a guarantor of peace; • Support of existing alliances; • Creation of new alliances; • Developing the idea of a multipolar world; • Confrontation with the fall of regimes. Russia aims to reestablish army of Bashar al-Assad since examples of Libya and Iraq have clearly shown the consequences of complete regime destruction to the Russian government; • Military power reinforcement; • Protection from radical Islamism threat; • Overcoming the consequences of imposed sanctions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforcement of its positions in the Middle East; • Creation of new alliances; • Development of relations in the field of economy; • Overcoming the consequences of imposed sanctions; • Support of a chain of Shi’a states – Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon (Shi’a crescent initiative); • Fighting the surrounding threats. Iran mostly supports National Defense Forces (volunteer paramilitaries); • Limitation of the US influence; • Supporting existing alliances; • Survival of the Iranian nation and the continued rule of its theocratic regime; • Seeking to dominate its neighbourhood; • Binge the regional hegemon.

would begin withdrawing its military presence in Syria at a time when Iran felt Assad was near to becoming the dominant Syrian force left Tehran uneasy.⁴⁶

In conjunction with the withdrawal announcement, the Russian-US brokered ceasefire agreements in Syria in February and May (2016) raised questions in Tehran regarding Russia's political wisdom. Another area of potential dispute between Russia and Iran is the future of the Syrian Kurds. Iran is closely watching Russian and American military relations with the Syrian Kurdish nationalist Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). While Iran has worked with the PYD and Russia to back Assad's forces, given its own increasingly volatile problems with Kurdish separatist groups, Tehran has rejected Rojava-style federalism in northern Syria. Russia, on the other hand, has a more nuanced position on federalism as the ultimate solution in Syria. Despite patching up the rift with Turkey, Russia's relations with the Kurds serve as useful leverage over Ankara and may be similarly useful in future relations with Damascus. In this light, in May 2016, Moscow prepared a draft text for a new Syrian constitution that endorses decentralisation and local administrations with broader powers. At the same time, Russia is also aware that federalism in Syria would worsen Moscow's relations with Tehran, Ankara, and Baghdad, and could have incalculable transformative impacts on regional order. Another longer-

term issue will be Russia's uneasy relationship with non-state actors, including Iranian backed militias in Syria. Iran has operationalised several pro-regime paramilitary groups, including a unit of Afghans known as *the Fatemiyoun Brigade* and *the National Defence Forces (NDF)*. Russia, on the other hand, has traditionally favoured strong central state structures with firm army control over security and is wary of the permanent militia forces in Syria.⁴⁷

Iranian-Russian alliance: balancing and Bandwagoning

Understanding the nature of Iranian-Russian alliance becomes inevitable. Alliances are usually formed according to two major patterns. First, balancing behaviour is the most classical form of alliances, in which states ally with other individual states to protect themselves from stronger and more powerful sides. The argument that Iran-Russia alliance is the result of balancing behaviour endeavours may be true to some extent. Russia is a key player in the MENA region, and it is already forming a significant balance of power with Iran against the United States.⁴⁸

Even though Iran may currently be Russia's most prominent partner in the Middle East, it is only one of many prospective and

actual partners. As was mentioned before, Russia is keen to preserve a positive relationship with Iran's regional rivals too, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, some of whom have considerable leverage vis-à-vis Moscow. Saudi Arabia is an important player when it comes to setting oil prices, while Israel could resume the arms sales to Georgia, which it halted at Russia's request after the Russia – Georgia war in 2008. Iran's deep enmity towards Israel requires Russia to maintain a tricky balancing act between the two. Israel wants to ensure that Russian weapons sold to Iran do not end up with Hezbollah and that Russian air cover does not give Iran opportunities to use Syria as a base against it. Moscow takes Israel's concerns seriously, and so this situation demands constant attention that Iran has no choice but to accept. Russia has also deepened its engagement with Iran's other regional foe, Saudi Arabia, whose main objective in Syria is countering Iranian interests. Despite fighting alongside Iranian – backed forces in Syria, Moscow has sought to sell its intervention to the House of Saud as a means of reducing Iranian influence in Damascus. In the past year, Putin hosted Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in Moscow and met King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud on several occasions, backing Saudi policies in Bahrain and Yemen. This

sort of cosyng up to Saudi Arabia may become a real source of tension between Iran and Russia, although for now they have marginalised the issue. Reaching out to Saudi Arabia is both an attempt by Russia to boost its economic relations with Riyadh (particularly in relation to arms sales) and to mollify the concerns of the new Saudi leadership about Russian military intervention in Syria. Russia also needs to prevent its role in Syria from being perceived as support for Shia Iran in a sectarian battle with the Sunni world, as this could have serious consequences at home. If Russia wants to be a meaningful actor in the Middle East, it needs a working relationship with all the significant local actors, not just Iran.⁴⁹

Second, alliances may be shaped according to bandwagoning behaviour, by which states join stronger sides in order to avoid potential threat either to protect themselves or to maximise their power. These states usually join newly rising powers out of fear or out of greed. This is applicable to the Iranian – Russian case. Politically, Iran is undoubtedly hyperactive in the Middle East with a plain military and financial engagement in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In Syria, the Al-Quds Forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps are currently providing significant military assistance to Bashar's

regime. Iran's involvement moved beyond Syria and reached Iraq, with several Iranian troops fighting Sunni such as the Islamic State. Yemen is another excellent illustration of Iranian involvement in the region. Far from the conflict zone, Iran is also exercising another form of hegemony in North Africa translated through cultural exchanges. For instance, a major forum on "Civilisation of Iran and Islam" took place in Tunisia on 24 August 2016, in an attempt to introduce Iranian ideology and its Shiite morals and beliefs. Given such Iranian dominance in the region, Russia alliance with Iran will be undoubtedly fruitful for the Kremlin. Russia will profit from such close relationship with Iran, politically, militarily, and economically.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The above analysis shows both convergence and divergence in the foreign policy of Russia and Iran in the Middle East in two broad respects – (1) in terms of its bilateral cooperation, as well as (2) in terms of independent roles in the region. First, there are similarities, so-called basis for the mutual cooperation. Countries tend to proclaim defending of the Syrian regime and defend its countries from the ISIS threat. At the same time, there are differences. Each country has its national interests and aims to develop its

influence in the region since it surely has historical background to do so.

Bilateral cooperation has its benefits. Thus, development of relations with Iran as a big Muslim state increases prestige of Russia and this is particularly important for a country where its second religion (by the number of believers) is Islam and when it is a member of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). It is also a benefit for Iran when Russia plays significant role on international arena. Recently the presence of Russia in the region is augmented. First, this represents an opportunity to show itself as an important actor of the international scale, whose role is necessary in order to resolve existing conflicts. Refuse to recognise American global domination underlies the basis of foreign policy of Russia and Iran both in theory and in practice. As Russia strives to do so in international scope, Iran's goal is also to reduce the U.S. influence but, first of all, in the Middle East region. Analysis of the legal documents demonstrates this intention. In this vein, there is mutual initiative to change the global system established after the bipolar system dissolvent. Still, both Iran and Russia pursue their own goals and more precise look on their activities in the Middle East show that the union has permanent character, explained by the necessity of cooperation due to its

hostility towards the West and being neighbouring states. This, by definition, determines future cooperation in the same areas of interest, while there is still a place for a misunderstanding and possible mistrust.

In this regard, the adoption of various security strategies for the management and control of regional developments in the Middle East should be on the agenda of the strategic policy on Iran and Russia. Peaceful settlement of disputes, stabilisation, efforts to create a regional consensus in line with the interests of Iran and Russia, effective and constructive interaction within the framework of existing regional mechanisms using active and multilateral diplomacy should be considered. Given the importance of the Middle East for regional and trans-regional actors, the diversity of issues in the region and the existence of influential domestic institutions, it seems that the implementation of favourable strategies in the field of foreign policy requires international role and active policy towards the powers. Internationally, while adopting a “bilateral alliance” strategy in the regional arena, given the competition between the three major countries of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, it will be aimed at preventing a power vacuum in the Middle East.

Generally, it can be said that Iran and Russia, especially after the developments in

the Arab world, have sought Profit-oriented cooperation and mutual assistance. Iran and Russia share common geopolitical perceptions: both do not tolerate the military presence of the West in the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Moscow also sees Iran as an ally in the face of two other common threats: separatism and Sunni jihadism, important in terms of protecting Russia as well as its sphere of influence represented by the so-called buffer states (Central Asia). Moscow’s close ties with Iran have helped strengthen Russia’s position in the Middle East since its involvement in the Syrian civil war in 2015. On the one hand, Iran is important to Moscow, because Iran is the most important geopolitical player in the Middle East. Hostile relations with Iran mean a decline in Russia’s manoeuvrability in the Middle East. However, Russia, along with Iran, also interacts and cooperates with most countries in the region. This Russian activism in the region and the attention of other countries is a sign of Russia’s multilateralism and multipolar pattern. Meanwhile, Syria’s role is very important to Russia, as it diverts US attention from other parts of Eurasia. Iran could also move its forces to Syria and Lebanon, profoundly affecting Yemen and Iraq. On the other hand, in the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan, Iran has the necessary capability

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to challenge the United States. Russia, on the other hand, is important to Iran, especially in supporting Iran in countering US sanctions and limiting Western pressure. Moscow can also take advantage of Iran's geopolitical weakness in favour of its economy by selling major Russian military equipment to Iran and encouraging deeper cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union and Tehran. These relations cannot be considered very friendly, especially in places like Syria where Tehran

and Moscow are competing with each other. However, this relationship is considered a win-win situation as long as the two countries do not threaten each other, which has little chance in actual circumstances.

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