

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
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Russia and Iran: Remaking the Middle East

The civil war in Syria has been raging for over four years and, until Russia intervened last year, it looked as if the Assad regime would fall. Russia under Vladimir Putin has intentionally linked itself with Iran to preserve the Assad regime. The costs of this civil war are absolutely horrific: Nearly 500,000 have been killed in Syria and somewhere close to 2.5 million+ refugees have fled the slaughter. The nation state of Syria really no longer exists. The nation of Syria is now a devastated landmass of competing militias and terrorist groups that are bent on destroying the nation for their own ideological ends.

The goal of both Russia and Iran, however, is much broader than this. For the entire span of Russia's history going back to at least Peter the Great (1672-1725) and Catherine the Great (1729-1796), it has sought military access and presence in the Middle East. Under Putin, it has achieved that goal. Two important military thresholds have recently been crossed by Russia:

- About two weeks ago, Russia, for the first time, launched cruise missiles at targets in Syria from warships in the Mediterranean Sea. Russia now has the ability to strike from virtually all directions in the Middle East, where it has been asserting its power—from warships in the Caspian Sea, from its base in the Syrian coastal province of Latakia and now from the Mediterranean. As many have observed, the Syrian civil war has become a public proving ground for new, sophisticated weaponry by Russia. The Kalibr cruise missiles, used in this recent launch, are a new addition to Russia's arsenal and are capable of carrying nuclear warheads.
- At about the same time as the firing of the cruise missiles, Russia launched a fleet of bombers bound for Syria from an Iranian air base, the first foreign military to operate from Iran's soil at least since World War II. These heavy bombers (Tu-22 and Su-34 bombers) are able to carry heavier payloads, adding to the devastation they can wreak on Syria. Putin's clear plan is to put together a coalition to fight in Syria with Russia at the center. This new level of cooperation between Russia and Iran is unprecedented in recent history, but it illustrates again the price the region is paying for US disengagement under President Obama from the region. [Obama chose not to institute safe (or no-fly) zones over Syria or to have the US conduct major air operations over Syria in support of the Kurds or other friendly opponents of Assad.] The use of this Iranian base is a follow-up to increased cooperation between Iran and Russia. In January 2015, Russia and Iran signed a military cooperation deal that focuses on training and fighting terrorism. In May of 2016, Russia made a long-delayed delivery of the advanced S-300 air-defense missile system, which had been ordered in 2007 but set aside during the upheaval and crises of the Middle East. But,

perhaps Putin moved too quickly in Iran with using the heavy bomber base. On 22 August, Iran abruptly ended the use of Iran's air base by Russia. Iran was apparently unhappy about the publicity and about being viewed in the region as a client of Russia. Iran's fiercely independent and nationalistic Revolutionary Guard was not pleased with being seen as a lackey of Russia.

For Iran, the nuclear agreement with the United States has been largely a positive development. However, that agreement has not produced a more cooperative, more irenic Iran. Iran has continued to fund and arm its major regional allies, including the Assad regime in Syria, the Lebanese militia Hezbollah and Houthi rebels in Yemen. Furthermore, the Iranian regime has continued to test and develop ballistic missiles. Finally, the regime has stepped up the arrests of opposition leaders and political activists opposing the regime. The following regime declarations from Iran have been, to say the least, disturbing:

- The Ayatollah Khamenei has declared that Iran needs at least 100,000 centrifuges to power its civilian nuclear program in the coming decades—20 times what the agreement with the US allows.
- Iran has talked of preparations to build 10 new nuclear reactors with Russian help. This will demand a regular supply of nuclear fuel from centrifuges that will be permitted to go online in a decade, according to the agreement with the US.
- Jay Solomon, chief foreign affairs correspondent of the *Wall Street Journal* writes: The supreme leader Khamenei “demanded a provision [in the US agreement] weakening a UN Security Council resolution that prohibits Tehran’s ballistic missile development—and got it. He wanted the UN embargo lifted on Iran’s ability to buy and export conventional arms—and got it, in five years. He wanted to retain Iran’s ability to export arms—and the deal does nothing to interfere with that.”
- There was hope that with this agreement Iran would work toward stabilizing the Middle East region. But that has not occurred. Indeed, with all the support Iran has given to Assad in Syria and its other terrorist minions, the region seems even more destabilized. Khamenei has sworn off any collaboration with the US in the Middle East, even in fighting the ISIS terrorist organization! He seems in sync with Russia’s goal to weaken the influence of the US, Israel and the Sunni Arab allies across the region. There is absolutely no evidence of any tapering off of support by Iran’s Revolutionary Guard for Hezbollah, the Houthis, Shiite Iraqis or the Palestinians. The goal of Iran seems to be to continue to develop missiles and conventional arms and then, in ten years, to become the latent nuclear power of the region.

Russia and Iran are marching decisively across the Middle East seeking, in the words of columnist Charles Krauthammer, “power, territory and tribute.” This is what the Middle East has gotten after nearly eight years of US retrenchment and withdrawal. The reordering of the Middle East is on track and the main players are Russia and Iran. The next US president will

need to deal with the serious consequences of eight years of President Obama's "leading from behind," which appropriately characterizes his foreign policy in the Middle East. The region is more unstable and more frightening than it was in 2008.

See Jay Solomon, "The Ayatollah's Game," in the *Wall Street Journal* (20-21 August 2016); Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post* (18 August 2016); Andrew E. Kramer and Anne Barnard, "Russia Asserts its Military Might in Syria," *New York Times* (20 August 2016); Neil MacFarquhar and David E. Sanger, "Russia Gains a Base in Iran To Bomb Syria," *New York Times* (17 August 2016); and Andrew Roth, "Iran Ends Russian Use of Air Base," *Washington Post* (22 August 2016).