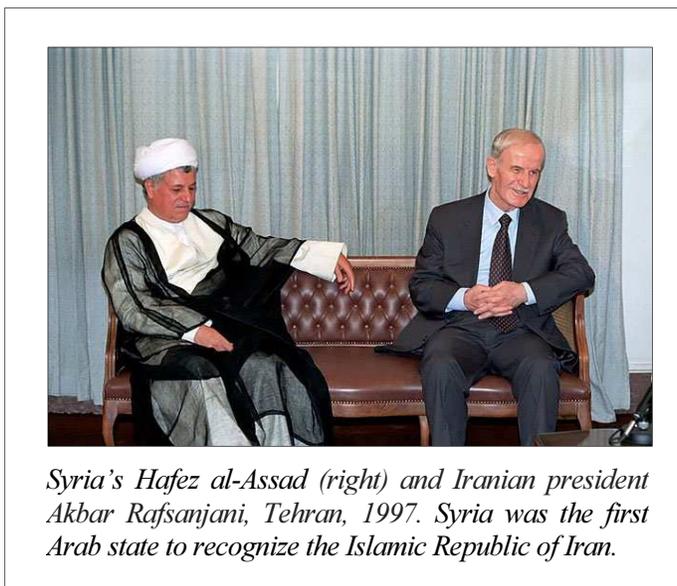


The Treacherous Triangle of Syria, Iran, and Russia

by Anna Borshchevskaya

Both Russia and Iran have deep, multifaceted, and long-standing connections to Syria. During the Cold War, Damascus emerged as the Soviet Union's most loyal Middle Eastern ally, and the relationship regained vibrancy in the 2000s as Vladimir Putin strove to reestablish Moscow's regional preeminence. Meanwhile, the 1979 Iranian revolution reversed Tehran's pro-U.S. orientation. Hafez al-Assad's Syria was the first Arab state to recognize the Islamic Republic of Iran and the only Arab state (apart from Libya) to support Iran during its 8-year war against Iraq (1980-88). In subsequent decades, Tehran intensified its political, economic, and military ties with Damascus.¹



Syria's Hafez al-Assad (right) and Iranian president Akbar Rafsanjani, Tehran, 1997. Syria was the first Arab state to recognize the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Syrian civil war ushered in a new era in Moscow and Tehran's relations with Damascus as both states used their military intervention in the conflict to deepen their Syrian entrenchment. And while the Ukraine invasion has made Moscow dependent on Tehran's military support, rather than lead to any disengagement from Syria, this strategic reconfiguration has intensified the Iranian-Russian security collaboration in general and in Syria in particular. This is bound to have far-reaching implications not only for the decade-long Israeli-Iranian "quiet war" in Syria but for the entire Middle East.²

¹ On the origins of the Iran-Syria alliance, see Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

² Jonathan Schanzer "[The Quiet War between Israel and Iran](#)," *Middle East Quarterly*, [Winter 2023](#).

Russia, Iran, and Syria

Bashar Assad's ascendancy following his father's death in June 2000 brought Syrian-Iranian relations to new heights with Tehran engaging in sensitive security and defense issues and using Syria's territory to transfer weaponry to its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah. In 2004, Damascus and Tehran signed a strategic cooperation agreement, which was upgraded to a mutual defense pact two years later, and was followed by yet another military cooperation agreement in March 2007.³ With Iran's tentacles reaching deep into Syria's political, cultural, and economic spheres, Damascus emerged as the main pillar of the Tehran-led, anti-Western (chiefly anti-U.S.) and anti-Israel "axis of resistance" along with Hezbollah and Hamas.

Russia's footprint was lighter but no less important. Seeking to reverse Moscow's post-Soviet partial retreat from the Middle East, by 2005, Putin had achieved a breakthrough with Damascus. In January of that year, Bashar made his first trip to Moscow, where he obtained an agreement to write off 73 percent of Syria's US\$13.4 billion Soviet-era debt and to reinvigorate the inflow of weapons and war material, largely decreased over the past two decades.⁴ Consequently, Moscow accounted for 78 percent of Syria's weapons purchases in 2007-12 with arm sales in the two years preceding the outbreak

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of the civil war totaling some \$20 billion.⁵ During the Cold War years, when Moscow provided extensive military aid, training, and maintenance to the

Syrian military, intermarriage between Russians and Syrians was quite prevalent. So much so, that thousands of Russian citizens still lived in Syria by the outbreak of the civil war with many in the Syrian security apparatus able to speak Russian.

The Syrian Civil War

Tehran offered unwavering and constant support on multiple fronts to Assad from the beginning of the anti-regime uprisings in March 2011, but at great cost. As the crisis quickly expanded to a full-fledged civil war, the Iranians provided Damascus with substantial quantities of oil, averaging two million barrels a month in 2013-18, with deferred payment, which covered most of its needs for crude.⁶ The Iranians also supplied weapons to the Syrian army (and Hezbollah) in violation of U.N. resolutions and deployed thousands of troops from both the regular Iranian army and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), as well as from proxy Shiite militias, notably Hezbollah.

The precise financial cost of the Iranian intervention remains unclear, but in March 2020, a member of the Iranian parliament's national security committee revealed that Tehran had spent some \$20-30 billion in

³ Mona Yacoubian, "[Syria's Alliance with Iran](#)," *Peace Brief*, U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C., [May 1, 2007](#).

⁴ News release, Kremlin.ru, [Jan. 25, 2005](#); *Cbonds* (UAE), [May 26, 2005](#); Efraim Karsh, *Soviet Policy towards Syria since 1970* (London: Macmillan, 1991), ch. 10.

⁵ Reuters, [Mar. 19, 2012](#); *The Moscow Times*, [Sept. 1, 2011](#).

⁶ Karam Shaar, "[The Syrian Oil Crisis: Causes, Possible Responses, and Implications](#)," The Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C., [Aug. 2019](#); *The Times of Israel* (Jerusalem), [Oct. 6, 2021](#).

Syria since 2011. A report the same year by the U.S. State Department's Iran Action Group provided a somewhat lower figure of over \$16 billion spent over the past eight years on "propping up the Assad regime and supporting its other partners and proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen"—about 5 percent of Iran's annual budget.⁷ Beyond infiltrating the Syrian military and security apparatus, as fighting subsided in recent years, Tehran embarked on a systematic Shiification strategy of Syrian society, so as to incorporate the country into the newly-created "Shiite Crescent" stretching from Iran via Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon all the way to the Mediterranean Sea.⁸

Moscow's involvement in the early years of the conflict was more limited than that of Tehran yet no less important. Throwing their weight from the start behind Assad's beleaguered regime, the Russians armed the Syrian military and strove to shore up Damascus's crumbling economy by agreeing to take crude oil in exchange for refined oil products and by providing loans to stave off Syrian bankruptcy. Crucially, Moscow provided vital political and diplomatic support that the internationally-isolated regime in Tehran was unable to offer, notably the prevention of Western military retaliation after the Assad regime gassed its own citizens in August 2013.



The Russians expanded the Syrian port of Tartus and the Khmeimim airbase and provided S-300 surface-to-air missiles (pictured) to Syria.

Over the years, the Kremlin repeatedly blocked U.N. Security Council resolutions aimed at the Assad regime, establishing itself as a power broker between Damascus and the international community. These efforts cost Moscow little but, over time, reshaped the diplomatic process in a way that was consistent with its political and military goals.⁹

Having intervened militarily in September 2015 to forestall Assad's imminent fall, Moscow sought to have a relatively light footprint that focused primarily on an air campaign and increased naval presence. To do this, the Russians expanded the northeastern port of Tartus and the Khmeimim airbase and introduced S-300 surface-to-air missiles, and later the more advanced S-400s, to Syria. Russian ground forces were made up primarily of special forces that focused on rebuilding, training, and advising the Syrian

⁷ *Al-Arabiya English* (Dubai), [May 20, 2020](#); "Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities," U.S. Dept. of State, Iran Action Group, Washington, D.C., [2020 ed.](#); Reuters, [Dec. 8, 2019](#).

⁸ Rauf Baker, "[Tehran's Shiification of Syria](#)," *Middle East Quarterly*, [Winter 2023](#).

⁹ Anna Borshchevskaya and Andrew J. Tabler, "[Triangular Diplomacy](#): Unpacking Russia's Syria Strategy," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., [July 7, 2021](#).

armed forces (besides conducting their own special reconnaissance missions). Within this framework, in 2013, Moscow created the Tiger Force unit, which by 2019, had evolved into the 25th counterterrorism division, as well as the 16th storming brigade.¹⁰

Articulated by Valery Gerasimov, Russian chief of general staff, this “limited action” strategy was tacitly predicated on the idea that Tehran and its proxies would do most of the fighting thus allowing Moscow to keep costs low in terms of blood and treasure.¹¹ At any given time, no more than 4,000-5,000 Russian troops stayed in Syria, including fighters of the Wagner group, a private military company with connections to the Russian defense ministry, and the military police though over time more than 60,000 soldiers had rotated in and out and received valuable military experience and training. Moscow also retained its cultural influence with the Syrian education ministry adding Russian as an optional second foreign language (after French and English) in schools as early as 2014 and Syrian state TV offering Russian-language news bulletins.¹²

While the financial cost of Moscow’s military involvement was similar to that of Tehran’s in absolute terms (an estimated \$2 billion per annum),¹³ it was a smaller figure relative to Russia’s larger defense budget and

Moscow and Tehran pursued different but complementary—rather than conflicting—goals.

overall larger economy. In addition, Russia’s human toll was far lower. In contrast to the thousands of lives expended by the Iranians and their

Shiite proxy militias, Moscow’s single largest loss of life involved a murky incident in February 2018 when several hundred Wagner group fighters violated the 2015 Russia-U.S. deconfliction agreement and crossed the Euphrates River from the Russian-controlled zone to the U.S.-controlled side. The ensuing battle resulted in the loss of up to 300 Russian and pro-Russian fighters.¹⁴

All in all, Moscow and Tehran pursued different but complementary—rather than conflicting—goals, which entailed propping up the Assad regime on multiple fronts while entrenching their own position in Syria and beyond.

Competition over Syria’s Future

Having set their sights on Syria’s economic resources, Moscow and Tehran began competing for contracts in oil and gas, phosphate, telecommunication, agriculture, tourism, real estate, and other fields as fighting subsided. To support their burgeoning alliances with local businesses, each of them reportedly established a special business council.¹⁵ While it is difficult to assess the extent to which this competition reflects a deeper strategic disagreement, available information suggests that the Russians obtained better deals than

¹⁰ Gregory Waters, “[From Tiger Forces to the 16th Brigade](#): Russia’s evolving Syrian proxies,” Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C., [Sept. 12, 2022](#).

¹¹ *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Moscow), Russian Ministry of Defense, [Mar. 4, 2019](#).

¹² France 24 TV (Paris), [Feb. 28, 2022](#).

¹³ Thomas Schaffner, “[Five Years after Russia Declared Victory in Syria](#): What Has Been Won?” Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, Mass., [Mar. 28, 2021](#).

¹⁴ Kimberly Martin, “[The Puzzle of Russian Behavior in Deir al-Zour](#),” *War on the Rocks*, Washington, D.C., [July 5, 2018](#).

¹⁵ Sinan Hatahet, “[Russia and Iran](#): Economic Influence in Syria,” Chatham House, London, [Mar. 2019](#).

the Iranians. In June 2018, for example, Stroytransgaz secured majority access to Syria's phosphate industry. Originally a subsidiary of the Russian state-run Gazprom, Stroytransgaz is now controlled by oligarch Gennady Timchenko, who was sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury after Russia's 2014 Crimea annexation. Whether this reflected a wider trend of elbowing Tehran out of the market as some observers claimed or only a one-off Syrian preference for a Russian company over its Iranian competitor, Moscow seems to be gaining greater long-term leverage in Syria through economic access and soft power influence such as language and other programs.¹⁶ However, this competition has not prevented Russian-Iranian economic cooperation whenever this suited their needs; for instance, in late 2018, the U.S. Treasury sanctioned a network through which Tehran provided oil to Damascus via several Russian companies.¹⁷

Nevertheless, not only are Moscow and Tehran unlikely to leave Syria so long as Assad needs them, but both see a future for themselves in the country and are more interested in compartmentalizing their differences than clashing over them. And while



Russian president Putin (left) meets with Iran's Ali Khamenei (center) and President Raisi, Tehran, July 19, 2022. The U.S. Treasury has sanctioned a network through which Tehran provided oil to Damascus via several Russian companies.

the Russians do not share the Iranian goal of a Shiite Crescent—and may even have concerns about the growing religious influence over Damascus's secularist regime¹⁸—Moscow has traditionally had no qualms about collaborating with Shiite Iran against extremist Sunni groups despite the fact that most of Russia's own Muslims are Sunni. For Assad, having Moscow's influence provides an alternative to Tehran's desire to make Syria a client state and allows him to play one off the other if necessary.¹⁹

The Ukraine Factor

In the early months of Moscow's Ukraine invasion, some reports rushed to speculate that Russian forces were being

¹⁶ Anna Borshchevskaya, *Putin's War in Syria: Russian Foreign Policy and the Price of America's Absence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021), p. 163; *The Washington Post*, [May 20, 2021](#).

¹⁷ Reuters, [Nov. 20, 2018](#); news release, U.S. Department of Treasury, Nov. 20, 2018.

¹⁸ Author interview with Israeli official, Jerusalem, Sept. 15, 2022.

¹⁹ Hanin Ghaddar, "The Latest Ceasefire Will Not Change [Hezbollah's Role in Syria](#)," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., [Jan. 6, 2017](#); Baker, "[Tehran's Shiification of Syria](#)."

withdrawn from Syria to support the Ukraine campaign, suggesting that IRGC and Hezbollah forces would seize the vacated Russian bases.²⁰ In fact, no meaningful withdrawal of Russian forces took place: only a tactical redeployment of some Wagner Group and possibly some military police units. If anything, Moscow's aggressiveness in Syria seemed to be growing in the wake of the Ukraine invasion as illustrated among other things by reported attacks on the U.S.-led coalition and U.S.-backed rebels.²¹ And while some S-300 missile batteries were withdrawn from northwestern Syria, the move is unlikely to have substantial operational impact as Moscow has thus far retained the much better S-400 missiles in Syria.²²

Politically, Moscow sustained its long-standing policy toward the Syrian crisis. In June 2022, Putin's special envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, stressed that a Syrian "settlement" remained a priority for Moscow and that its interest in the country had remained unabated.²³ Indeed, the following month, Moscow extracted substantial concessions for itself and the Assad regime in return for agreeing not to veto U.N. Security Council Resolution 2642, which provided for a 6-month extension of cross-border humanitarian aid to parts of Syria not



Russian military police in north Syria. Following the Ukraine invasion, the Russians stepped up military police patrols along the Syrian border to prevent entrenchment of Shiite militias.

controlled by the regime (instead of the original 1-year extension).²⁴

At an August 5, 2022 meeting with Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the resort city of Sochi, Putin sought to convince his guest to reestablish direct contacts with Assad. While Erdoğan felt such a move to be premature, he gradually relented to the possibility. In late November, he announced that normalization with Syria could follow the thawing of Turkish-Egyptian relations, set in motion after Erdoğan's meeting with Egypt's Abdel Fattah Sisi at the 2022 FIFA World Cup opening ceremony, their first such encounter since 2013.²⁵ Earlier that month, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov visited Amman where he discussed with his Jordanian hosts possibilities for ending the conflict and reincorporating Syria into the Arab League. According to intelligence reports, prior to the visit, Moscow had taken steps to reassure

²⁰ *The Times of Israel*, [May 8, 2022](#); *The Independent* (London), [May 12, 2022](#).

²¹ *The Wall Street Journal*, [June 17, 2022](#); *Newsweek*, [July 19, 2022](#).

²² *The Drive: The WarZone* (Calif.), [Aug. 27, 2022](#).

²³ *Kommersant* (Moscow), [June 16, 2022](#).

²⁴ Anna Borshchevskaya, Louis Dugit-Gros, and Andrew J. Tabler, "Time to Develop a [Plan B for Syria Aid](#)," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., [July 14, 2022](#).

²⁵ TASS News Agency (Moscow), [Dec. 12, 2022](#).

Amman that the Ukraine war would not create a dangerous vacuum in southern Syria. To that end, the Russians stepped up military police patrols along the Syrian side of the border to prevent the entrenchment of Shiite militias in the area.²⁶

Not surprisingly, Assad supported the Ukraine invasion just as he had endorsed the Crimea annexation eight years earlier. Damascus was among the very few governments to back Moscow against the U.N. General Assembly's nearly unanimous condemnation of the invasion in March and October 2022. The Syrians also recognized the independence of the annexed Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and Assad called Putin after the invasion to congratulate him on what he described as "a correction of history and re-balance to the world that [Russia] has lost after the dissolution of the Soviet Union." Assad told Putin,

[The] Western countries bear responsibility for chaos and bloodshed ... as these countries use their dirty methods to support terrorists in Syria and the Nazis in Ukraine and in various parts of the world ... Russia doesn't only defend itself, but it defends the world and [the] principles of justice and humanity.²⁷

To back up this view, the Assad regime organized several pro-Russia rallies in Latakia, Tartus, and Damascus where par-

Assad supported the Ukraine invasion as he had the Crimea annexation eight years earlier.

ticipants voiced their support for Russia and attacked the

U.S.-led media fierce campaign [that] aims to defame the image of Russia which seeks, through its military operation, to protect civilians and preserve its security and stability.²⁸

For its part, Tehran rolled out the red carpet for Putin in July 2022, days after U.S. president Joe Biden's trip to the Middle East for meetings with Israeli and Arab leaders. It was the Russian president's first trip outside the former Soviet Union since the invasion, and it highlighted the importance he placed on improving ties with the Islamic Republic. During the visit, Putin met with President Ebrahim Raisi and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who publically supported the Russian invasion, telling Putin that "if you hadn't taken on the initiative yourself, another side would have taken on the initiative and caused the war."²⁹

Conclusion

Both Moscow and Tehran, for different reasons, view their entrenchment in Syria as a means to broader ends. Given Damascus's importance for the realization of the ayatollahs' hegemonic ambitions, the pros of their Syrian involvement have outweighed the hefty price tag. For Moscow, the overall balance of the Syrian undertaking has been more complex. While allowing the consolidation of Russia's military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, relations with Syria have never been a goal in

²⁶ *The Syrian Observer* (Istanbul), [Nov. 2, 2022](#); Borshchevskaya et al, "[Plan B for Syria Aid](#)"; Reuters, [Nov. 3, 2022](#).

²⁷ SANA (Damascus), [Feb. 25, 2022](#); Euronews TV (Lyon), [Mar. 6, 2014](#); Reuters, [July 29, 2022](#).

²⁸ SANA, [Mar. 28, 2022](#).

²⁹ *CBS News*, [July 20, 2022](#).

and of itself for the Kremlin but rather a means to push back the U.S.-led global order—as has been the Ukraine invasion. Indeed, it is arguable that the Syrian intervention helped trigger the latter invasion. For one thing, Moscow viewed Syria as a training ground for future operations, and its military entrenchment in the Eastern Mediterranean has bolstered its Black Sea position. For another, and perhaps most importantly, Western failure to make Putin pay the price of a third successful military intervention in less than a decade (after Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014) reinforced his belief that the West would not stand in his way on Ukraine. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 only reinforced this view.

If the Syrian civil war led to the consolidation of Russian-Iranian strategic ties despite occasional tactical disagreements and coordination challenges, the Ukraine war has taken this relationship to a wholly new level. With Moscow desperately seeking Tehran's military support to revive its botched Ukrainian misadventure, the Kremlin has been prepared to offer the Islamist regime, according to National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby, "an unprecedented level of military and technical support that is transforming their relationship into a full-fledged defense partnership."³⁰ Apart from allowing the Iranians to deepen their Syrian entrenchment, this momentous development is bound to have far-reaching strategic implications beginning with acceleration of Tehran's dogged quest for nuclear weapons. But the broader issue is that years of U.S. de-prioritization of Syria and recent tacit acquiescence to the Assad regime allows this dictator, accused of the most heinous war crimes, and his two rogue allies to emerge victorious from the decade-long Syrian civil war. This may well convince U.S. ad-

³⁰ Associated Press, [Dec. 9, 2022](#).

versaries, already confounded by indefinite prolongation of the Ukraine war, that the pros of challenging Washington, in the long run, outweigh the negatives.

While there is not much Washington could do to affect the domestic Syrian situation, it could, nevertheless, sanction Iranian entities providing oil to the Assad regime and counter Hezbollah's attempts to import Iranian energy to Lebanon, a scheme that involves energy transiting Syria and potentially benefiting the Assad regime. Meanwhile, the West should look for alternatives to Russia's veto on the Security Council when it comes to humanitarian aid to Syria, not only out of humanitarian concerns but because of a loophole that could empower Assad through energy projects.³¹

Concerning Moscow, the West should raise the costs of its Ukrainian invasion on multiple fronts so as to ensure that Kyiv wins the war, which will in turn impact Moscow's strategic position in Syria and its partnership with Tehran.

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³¹ Katherine Bauer, et al, "[Power to the People? Scrutinizing the U.S.-Arab Effort to Supply Energy to Lebanon via Syria](#)," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., [Dec. 27, 2021](#); Borschchevskaya et al, "[Plan B for Syria Aid](#)."