Cold War and Ayatollah Residues

Syria as a Chessboard for Russia, Iran, and the United States

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Abstract

Many Western accounts conflate Russian and Iranian support for the Assad regime as purposeful recalcitrance against US policy and interests. More nuanced analysis, however, reveals two agendas not really concerned with the United States: Russia's support of Syria is motivated by global positioning, while Iran's support is influenced by concerns for regional hegemony vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In both these scenarios, sentiment against US policy is not the engine driving Russian and Iranian strategies. This is indicative of a somewhat myopic Western tendency to lens the agendas of other states through their relative positioning with the United States. In this case, the habit undermines properly understanding two important players in the Syrian crisis and beyond in the Middle East region. The tendency to make itself the sun in a Copernican foreign policy universe handicaps the United States by impairing its diplomatic vision and retarding options for real interaction. This analysis dissects the Russian and Iranian positions from their own perspectives, highlighting the consequences they may have not only on the Assad regime into the future, but on relations between Iran, Russia, and the United States.

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Much has been made about continued Russian and Iranian support for the Assad regime during the tumultuous and deadly Syrian uprising. Most Western accounts have conflated these support initiatives together

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under a general position that simply wants to be recalcitrant and problematic for US foreign policy. This conflation, however, is misguided and deserves to be deemphasized. More complete analysis reveals two rather dramatically dichotomous agendas pushing forward each respective pro-Bashar position: Russia's support is motivated by its own concerns for global positioning, a combination of commercial weapon sales activity and a more esoteric belief in Russian international presence, while Iran's support is most influenced by its concerns for regional hegemony, with particular attention paid to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The loss of Syria as a strategic partner in the region is seen by both as reducing their respective weight to that of a mere middling power—Russia on the global level and Iran on the regional one. Keeping Syria in play for the greater Russian and Iranian interests, therefore, helps maintain the self-envisioned status of each as a dominant player. In both of these scenarios, sentiment against US policy is not in fact the engine pushing Russian and Syrian strategies forward. It is the somewhat myopic Western diplomatic tendency to view the agendas of other states through their relative positioning with the United States first that blinds Western analysis to truer motivations and consequently more accurate evaluations. This article dissects Russian and Iranian motivations, highlighting the implications not only for Assad's future but also for relations between Iran, Russia, and the United States.

Russia: The Need for Global Diplomatic Significance

Russia's relationship with Syria has always hung on a pendulum, swinging from relatively close to relatively cool over the past half-century. Consequently, analyses describing that relationship today are uneven—a mixture of accurate assessment and pure conjecture. What remains constant for its dealings with Syria, however, is Russia's desire to maintain global diplomatic significance and ensure its place as a legitimate international influence peddler. To that end, Syria is a tool to help facilitate those endeavors. It is not about any special infatuation with Syria; rather, it is about Russia satisfying its own global stage perceptions. This need for global recognition and legitimacy has a long and documented history within the Russian diplomatic psyche.

Two of the most important aspects informing Russia's Syrian interaction deal with the Arab Spring and Russian material interests.[1] Many in the West are not familiar with assessments of the Arab Spring marked more by suspicion and skepticism than optimism and hope. However Russia, with its unique perspective on radical Islamism because of its long, bloody conflict with Chechnya, has always been concerned about the aftermath of authoritarian regime change in the Arab world. While the West has been comfortable viewing the Arab Spring as a groundswell of grassroots democratic ideals, Russia has warily seen it as a potential "Great Islamist Revolution."[2] Keeping in mind that the new regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya are not exactly blossoming with democratic institutions and stability, the empirical reality seems to affirm Russian skepticism. The issue, therefore, is not that Russia finds Assad superior; simply, the status quo seems less chaotic and dangerous to Russian interests.

Discussions about Russian material interests in Syria create significant scholarly debate. Many consider the commercial investments to be relatively modest and not part of any larger Syrian strategy.[3] This view, however, is too economically quantitative, missing the greater esoteric foreign policy point behind Russia's commercial dealings. If the greatest national objective for Russia is to maintain global diplomatic significance and international influence, then maintaining relevance within the Middle East must be a crucial part of the master plan. Syria is by far the most convenient partner for Russia in this endeavor. As such, Russian commercial initiatives are more about strategic allegiance and perceived political dependence and less about profit. This helps explain why Russia agreed to renegotiate Assad's debt repayment in a manner that was extremely generous and beneficial to Syria. Rather than a sign of weakness or incompetence, it was an effective strategic measure that tied Syria more tightly to the Russian sphere of influence, thereby keeping a Middle East doorway open. Russia still obsesses over the weakening of its perceived spheres of influence—the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Commercial investiture in Syria is just one tool in the Russian diplomatic pouch, therefore, to keep active and engaged with the Middle Eastern sphere. With this in mind, the expansiveness of Russia's economic engagement with Syria becomes quite impressive. It is not so much about how many millions of dollars are earned as how

many dozens of critical industries Russia gains connections to and influence over. Data seem to indicate the influence is substantial:

- The Syrian army has deployed Russian Pantsyr-SE1 guns and missiles, short-to-medium-range air defense systems, and the medium-range Buk-M2 systems. These systems are believed to be able to provide extended low-altitude and surface coverage. Russia supplied Syria with 9K317E Telar vehicles, which are capable of carrying and firing the missiles that can be operated autonomously. Finally, Syria procured two Bastion systems with 72 Yakhont missiles.[4]
- Moscow and Damascus agreed to develop mutually beneficial cooperation and trade in areas of economics, research, and technology. Energy, irrigation, oil and gas extraction and delivery, rail transport, fertilizer production, and the metal industry are among the priority areas for cooperation between the two countries.[5]
- Russia rendered technical help to Syria in building a whole range of hydroelectric facilities on the Euphrates River. The two sides agreed on a general plan of water resource activity through the year 2030, including plans for building dams and reservoirs, digging canals, drilling wells, expanding existing systems, and creating new ones.[6]
- Agreements were made across a host of tourism, industrial, construction, and natural resource areas in an attempt to consciously increase Russian-Syrian bilateral trade to more than $1 billion by 2015. The two countries also signed an interbank agreement that will allow Russian banks to act as guarantors for implementing joint projects. Previously, only Western banks could act as guarantors, making projects prohibitively more expensive in Syria.[7]
- Moscow hopes to bind Damascus to its own military-industrial complex. Specifically, Russia wants to move beyond simply reequipping Syria's missile defense systems and instead become the foundation for the country's missile "umbrella." In essence, Moscow plans to *play the role of Damascus's sponsor* on the international stage, thereby becoming *Bashar Assad's indispensable friend*.[8]

These highlights reveal the totality of Russian commercial engagement with Syria. Well before the current crisis, Russia clearly saw commercial partnership as a Middle East road to increase its own relevance on the international stage. Being Assad's "indispensable friend" was not as

much about filling the Russian coffers or improving Syrian society as it was about facilitating Russia's chief international objective: to maintain significance as a major global player specifically within a critical region.

In addition to the Arab Spring and commercial activity, foreign policy is a third aspect that elucidates a more nuanced analysis of Russia's position on Syria. Russian foreign policy witnesses a much larger vision than simply establishing bilateral relations or fostering sentiment against US foreign policy. Indeed, specific foreign policy measures reveal Syria to be more instrumental as a conduit than a cause, more a means than an end:

- President Putin pushed back against European leaders who wanted him to take a firmer line against Syria's Bashar Assad. Putin stuck firmly to his position that both sides are to blame in the Syrian conflict and that Western pressure to unseat Assad was doing nothing except igniting the risks of civil war. The simple fact that European leaders are coming to Putin to influence Syria is a victory in and of itself—Russia has tried to position itself as a center of diplomacy.[9]
- The West has critiqued Syria through the lens of democracy and human rights, of which the Russian government is instinctively skeptical. The Russians see it more as a proxy struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran than a homegrown uprising. The foreign policy establishment in Moscow genuinely believes Syria is messier and more prone to unpredictable escalation than Western leaders understand. Consequently, the Russian position should be given greater credence.[10]
- Syria's precarious position is exactly what Putin wants. While Russia may not be willing or able to defend Syria militarily, the combination of Syria's heightened sense of insecurity and its isolation from the West is what has allowed preferential access for the Russian arms and petroleum industries to Syria as well as an increased diplomatic presence dealing with the crisis. In some ways, the lack of progress only bodes well for Russia; there will not be a Syrian-US rapprochement anytime soon, nor is it likely Syria will experience a democratic revolution that will bring an immediate pro-Western government to power in Damascus. As long as this is the case, Russia remains the most influential player.[11]
- Moscow has warned other powers against trying to turn Syria into another Libya. It believes the international community must work

> to achieve an inter-Syrian reconciliation and is against the adoption of any UN Security Council resolutions that could be interpreted as a signal of armed interference in Syria. Moscow prides itself on being a world power and, on that basis alone, needs to have a credible presence in the region. That at least partly explains its stance on Syria, where the port of Tartous is the Russian navy's only outlet on the Mediterranean Sea.[12]

These foreign policy positions do not bind Russia inextricably to Assad. On the contrary, Russian foreign policy seems more pragmatic; it would not hesitate to drop support for a regime that it could see was ultimately going to fall. In other words, what is most important to Russia is its overall relevance in the region and not how close its friendship is with a particular leader. Indeed, in 2013 President Putin himself declared, "We are not concerned about the fate of Assad's regime. . . . We are worried about . . . what next?" He added that Russia's position is "not to leave Assad's regime in power at any price, but to first let Syrians agree among themselves how they should live next. Only then should we start looking at ways to change the existing order."[13] When dealing with Syria, Russia is for Russia far more than for Assad.

Many interpret these statements as a subtle shift away from stalwart support for Assad. This is not so. Russia's main purpose was not to prop up Assad but rather to prop up its *own* significance. Thus, when Assad began to openly contradict some of the promises he made to the Russian government (like honoring a cease-fire, removing heavy weaponry from around besieged cities, and allowing humanitarian teams into troubled areas), it was not against Russian policy to distance itself from Assad, as many analysts have proclaimed.[14] Rather, it was keeping the bigger power picture in mind, regardless of who is leading Syria.

What is too often ignored or discounted by the West in Russian foreign policy thinking is what can be loosely called "the Chechen effect." The Russian Foreign Ministry, headed by Sergei Lavrov, has consistently proclaimed the recklessness of pushing for regime change when the "opposition" is completely unknown and at least partially mixed with radical Islamists. Lavrov has considered the general Western opposition to Assad—supporting intervention without seriously considering the aftermath consequences—as catastrophic. Indeed, the deputy prime minister, Dmitry Rogozin, tweeted in 2013 in Russian that "the West behaves in the Islamic world like a monkey with a grenade." Tweeted

jokes aside, the sentiment hints at the more substantive foundation of Russian policy on Syria: radical Islamist opposition is not to be trifled with and should be countered and pushed back wherever possible. Russia felt that the failure to understand this lesson is what literally bit the US State Department tragically in Benghazi, Libya. Producing the same environment in Syria would obviously be detrimental to any and all Russian interests.

This belief clearly has also powered the activities of the Russian Mission to the UN, where there have been at least three separate Security Council veto blocks by Russia over resolutions meant to impact the Syrian crisis, in addition to stopping both US- and British-drafted Security Council condemnations of the Assad government. Most US news agencies characterized these maneuvers as somewhat petulant and immature, based more on trying to block US interests rather than pursuing Russian ones, even though Russian analysts will openly say this policy in fact mimics US tactics in the UN when it comes to Israel. Thus it might be time to consider more seriously this Russian argument that basically breaks down as "what foreign policy is good for the US goose is good for the Russian gander." This analysis also opens the debate more clearly for examining whether there are legitimate questions to be asked about the composition of Syrian opposition forces and what type of Syrian regime would be constructed if Assad were deposed. The emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) seems to give some credence to Russian concerns.

Important to note is how absent from all of these Russian considerations is a focus on countering US policy just for the sake of countering. Many Western diplomats seem to betray a bias that the majority of Russian global agendas are relatively obsessed with US policy.[15] Numerous scholars back up this general perception by emphasizing how Russia defended the Syrian regime against Western pressure, using tactics to delay and disrupt repeated US efforts to resolve the crisis, whether they came from Washington or through the UN in New York.[16] These arguments are as overstated as the Western conventional wisdom that many of Russia's contemporary positions are incapable of evolving beyond the residue of Cold War mentalities or are just an aversion to Western-led military/policy initiatives.[17] Russian policymakers are clearly aware of US maneuvers and objectives, but that awareness is not a primary focus in the development of a global Russian agenda. This Cold War residue,

or Neo–Cold War if you will, seems more in the minds of scholars and practitioners *in the West* rather than in the diplomatic institutions of Russia itself. Russia's interactions and support for Syria have more to do with its contemporary desire for influence and relevance in the Middle East region than they do with Cold War nostalgia, knee-jerk refutation of US policy, or an innate desire to reconstruct Soviet influence.

Iran: Clutching at Regional Hegemony

> *[The Islamic Awakening, what the West labels as the Arab Spring, indicates] the world is at a historical juncture, where the Iranian nation and Muslim nations can play a fundamental role in advancing Islamic values worldwide.*
>
> —Hossein Mousavian (2013)

If the Russian case shows how the Syrian conflict impacts other countries beyond simplistic accusations of trying to reflexively counter US policy, the Iranian case only deepens said complexity. Understanding Iranian positions means one must account for alternative reports that paint a different picture of events across Syria, a unique interpretation of the Arab Spring, a deep-seated belief in Western interference that violates the principle of national sovereignty, and a vision of Iranian regional hegemony that is most concerned with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the GCC. Too many analyses focus so much on a historical hatred toward Israel and animosity toward the United States—an Ayatollah residue if you will—that there is little room for more nuanced explanations.

This is not to say Israel and the United States are not factors in the collaboration between Syria and Iran. Indeed, both strongly oppose the US role in Iraq, both support Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine, and both have long proclaimed a shared rejection of US influence in the greater Middle East region.[18] The current leadership in both Syria and Iran are decidedly hardline when it comes to engagement with the West. These positions are largely reactionary, however. They alone are not solely responsible for explaining the alliance and consistent support that has come from Tehran to Damascus, as that support has been rather widespread and diversified. It is not just reactive, but active:

- Militarily, the countries signed a mutual defense pact in June 2006 and an additional military cooperation agreement in March 2007. This enhanced and evolved an earlier strategic cooperation agreement in 2004. This security and military cooperation supposedly includes Iranian missile sales as well as intelligence cooperation with Iran providing equipment and training to Syrian operatives.[19]
- The two countries have signed numerous trade and economic cooperation agreements across a wide swath of sectors, including telecommunications, agriculture, and petroleum, representing up to $3 billion in Iranian investment.[20]
- There are many joint ventures between Syria and Iran, including car manufacturing, oil refineries, wheat silos, cement plants, and construction facilities. The Iranians have been very active in concluding agreements with Syria to help renovate several oil pipelines that could carry oil from Iraq to the Syrian coast.[21]
- Iran resumed shipping military equipment to Syria over Iraqi airspace in an effort to bolster the embattled Assad government.[22]
- Iranian Quds Force personnel are reportedly involved in training the heavily Alawite paramilitary forces in Syria as well as the formal Syrian forces that secure the nation's air bases. In addition, Iran has supplied cargo planes for the Syrian military to ferry men and supplies around the country.[23]
- The Islamic Republic of Iran has made a series of practical moves to end the conflict, including holding the Syrian National Dialogue between the Syrian opposition and government in November 2012. More than 200 Syrian religious and political figures, leaders of tribes and parties, as well as representatives and leaders of the opposition groups joined in a two-day meeting in Tehran.[24]

Both Russia and Iran see Western interference in Syrian affairs as contributing negatively to the conflict. Iran has been adamant in denouncing the various overtures coming from Washington. When Senator John McCain came out in support of possibly arming the Syrian opposition, Hossein Ebrahimi, vice chairman of the Iranian Parliament's national security and foreign policy commission, vehemently said that "the presence of Iran and Russia's flotillas along the Syrian coast has a clear message against the United States' possible adventurism. . . . [I]n

case of any US strategic mistake in Syria there is a possibility that Iran, Russia, and a number of other countries will give a crushing response to the US."[25] US rhetoric moves across partisan lines as well, with Hillary Clinton recently saying, "The [Assad] regime's most important lifeline is Iran. . . . There is no longer any doubt that Tehran will do whatever it takes to protect its proxy and crony in Damascus." She subsequently pledged that the United States would send an additional $45 million in aid to Syrian rebels.[26] Western interference is not a euphemism for the United States; numerous state editorials in Iran lamented the selection of Burhan Ghalioun, a Syrian protestor living in France, as head of the Syrian Transitional Council. To Iran this was a direct indication of Europe's desire to model developments in Syria according to the "Western plans" already put in place in Egypt and Libya:

> Burhan Ghalioun is a professor at the French Sorbonne University and a secularist figure among the protesters. His selection shows that no other criterion was used in his selection other than him being a secularist with views close to those of the Western nations that support the unrest in Syria. Of course this issue itself points to intervention by these nations in creating and guiding the unrest in rebellion in Syria. . . . They are hoping to be able to expedite developments and unrest in Syria with this method and with the formation of a transitional Council that can organize foreign financial, political, and military aid on a wider and official scale.[27]

The more prescient argument is to emphasize the strategic nature of Iran's criticism of the West in Syria; it is not so much driven by old ideological diatribes characterizing the United States as "Satan" as it is pushed by its own contemporary agenda to reposition itself as a regional hegemon in the Middle East. In so doing, it is not maneuvering so much against the United States and Israel as it is striving to outmaneuver countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia. To that end, the intense criticism of the United States and Israel are simply tools to accomplish the more important strategic objective—outpace these two regional hegemonic rivals and establish its own dominance. This puts an entirely different spin on Iranian declarations that are usually scoffed at in the West regarding the Syrian conflict:

- The political pressure, *as well as offers of vast amounts of money by some Arab countries*, had no effect on the Arab observers during their mission.[28]

- After the Arab observer team issued its report from Syria, the United States *and some Western and Arab countries* expressed their unhappiness. This was mainly because the report documented for the first time that some of the protest groups were in fact armed and committing attacks on Syrian forces. Instead of agreeing to the continuation of the work, they (presumably the West and *the Arab League*) announced that the continuation of the presence of Arab observers in Syria would be futile.[29]
- Some satellite television channels, *such as Al-Arabiya, Al-Jazeera, and the BBC in Arabic,* have made every effort to distort the realities of the situation in Syria. They wish to influence public opinion with their media propaganda. Rumors about the killing of Bashar Assad and the commander of the Iranian Quds Force are examples of such propaganda.[30]
- Syrian and Iranian state television broadcast reports showing seized weapons caches and confessions by terrorist elements describing how they obtained arms from foreign sources. One terrorist, Ammar Ziyad al-Najjar, *confessed that he had received foreign aid and instructions from contacts in Saudi Arabia and Jordan to deface Damascus*.[31]

The issue here is not to test the veracity of the claims or rationalize the positions. Rather, it is to note how prominently Iranian position and respect within the region factor into its subsequent dealings with the West on Syria. Israel and the United States will forever be convenient scapegoats and objects of derision within Iranian foreign policy, but containing the growing dominance and political influence of countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey is a much more pressing and immediate need for Tehran. This is because Iran is viewing regional power and influence in the Middle East very much like a zero-sum game—whatever advantage Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or the GCC overall get means a reduction of power and respect available for Iran. This was clearly in play when Iran initially pulled out of a UN-organized international peace conference about Syria in early 2014, with both Tehran's ambassador to the UN, Mohammad Khazaee, and Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif creating false protests about the conditions and agreements to which Iran would have to adhere.[32] This was apparently in direct contradiction to the UN understanding and was not in fact based on Iran trying to subvert Western/US interests but rather to carve out a more distinct and "special"

role for Iran vis-à-vis other possible participants, most notably Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Iran is concerned about improving the power of the so-called Shia Crescent extending through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon; Iran needs a permanent outlet to the Mediterranean Sea while balancing the small oil-producing Gulf States that work so cozily within the Western economic system.[33] Outmaneuvering Saudi Arabia on this stage would be a first serious step allowing Iran to legitimize its regional hegemony. Indeed, Saudi Arabia has become increasingly more critical of these efforts, citing the coming to power of a Shia government in Iraq and the emergence of Hezbollah in Lebanon as giving the impetus to start a geopolitical shift in favor of Tehran.[34] This is a major concern for all the Sunni-dominated regimes in the Gulf region. The significance of this so-called Shia-Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis in Gulf State minds cannot be overstated; countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates believe a Shia axis of this sort would not stop at wounding Israel or vexing US interests, but would look to extend and gain Shia power centers in Manama, Riyadh, Cairo, and Dubai.[35] Syria, therefore, is much more about establishing Iranian regional power than about blocking US policy exclusively.

This was never more powerfully stated than when a senior Iranian Revolutionary Guard leader, Brig Gen Hossein Hamedani, boldly asserted that President Assad was "fighting this war in Syria as our deputy."[36] In addition, Hamedani characterized his country's role in Syria as a "*sacred defense of Iran*." Bombastic bravado notwithstanding, the sentiment makes sense only under a motivational framework that goes far beyond stereotypical posturing against US policy or Israeli interests. Syria is seen by Iran more as an effective stage from which to broadcast and disseminate its own regional influence and power against its fellow Arab and Turkic competitors rather than being exclusively about settling old scores with the hated Western leader and its Jewish ally.

As an explicit example, Turkey and Iran have a clear regional political rivalry. Any changes in their power vis-à-vis the other would fundamentally alter the balance of power in the region. It does not help that Iran has seen Turkey move ever closer to the West over the past three decades while Turkey is concerned about overt Iranian initiatives meant to increase its regional influence, like the current nuclear crisis.[37] Indeed, Western analysis of Iranian support for Syria has focused so heavily on

what US foreign policy is, rather than looking diligently at Iranian interests, that many have missed the underlying and increasing tension between Iran and its regional rivals, even as that tension has become more public. For example, Tehran over the past few years has basically staged an anti-Turkish campaign:

- Iranian- and Hezbollah-affiliated media outlets have harshly denounced Turkey's policy toward Syria.
- They claim that Turkey prefers the United States over Syria.
- Ankara engaged in an unholy alliance with Doha (Qatar) against Damascus.
- Ankara assists and provides opposition groups with arms and intelligence in their struggle against the government.[38]

Turkey for its part has responded in kind, with local columnists writing about supposed Iranian influence over its own problematic PKK Kurdish resistance problem in the eastern part of the state. To both of these countries, Syria is a strategic hub for their own national security agendas. Turkey sees itself as a successful combination of secularism, Islam, and economic development—a model it believes would translate well to Syria and would have Western backing. Iran sees the Syrian crisis, if allowed to go the way of the Turkish model, as the final missing link in its full encirclement by the West.[39] Readily apparent is that through all of this intense jockeying for regional dominance, the concerns over US-funded Zionist conspiracies are largely absent. In other words, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia all have more pressing regional concerns about how Syria goes than to obsess melodramatically about US imperialism. Their national security priorities make Syria important, but the United States is a mere backdrop to those pressures, tensions, and intraregional rivalries.

If a "Cold War residue" created problems in offering a nuanced, balanced, and more objective look at Russian strategy in Syria, then a similar "Ayatollah residue" seems to exist and create problems for Iranian analysis. This piece is a small first step in placing the specific national security interests and long-term regional and global power goals of states like Russia and Iran at the top of their foreign policy causal ladders. In the Iranian case, rhetoric against Zionism and US imperialism are convenient tools to mask deeper and more pressing matters at the regional

level against local rivals that represent far greater and far more immediate threats to Iranian priorities and objectives. It is true that Israel and the United States could be influential blocks preventing Iran from becoming a major global power. But before it can worry about that, Iran's policies and priorities are more focused on regional hegemony and rivalries with powers like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the GCC. Understanding those rivalries and priorities gives many more insights into the Iranian presence in Syria than any other factors currently being focused on in the West. They also most certainly afford analysts more complete data sets into which to interpret the Iranian foreign policy mindset.

How US Foreign Policy Relevance Gets Overplayed

This analysis breaks down the interests, goals, and hopes for Iran and Russia vis-à-vis the Syrian crisis. Undoubtedly, these interests do not coincide with professed US interests against the Assad regime. What has been largely missed in the contemporary discussions, however, is how Iran and Russia both view the conflict in Syria from different perspectives that do not place US foreign policy as the chief motivating factor. Concern over a US "long-term vision" in Syria is far down the priority list for both countries. This is not because they think the United States does not matter or that it is not negatively contributing to the conflict; both countries fervently believe that. It is simply that the Syrian conflict fits the national interests of Russia and Iran on other more immediate threat levels that demand greater attention and prioritization. When US analysts downplay these more real concerns and focus instead on US initiatives as the primary explanatory factors, they make a more nuanced and complete understanding of the Syrian crisis less likely. This also relegates two major players as mere reactionary stereotypes. In other words, its tendency to make itself the sun in a Copernican foreign policy universe handicaps the United States by impairing its diplomatic vision and retarding options for real interaction.

This is not an attempt to justify or rationalize Iranian or Russian positions in Syria. It is clear both countries prefer a least-disruptive scenario that de facto leaves the Assad regime in power. Neither claims to be against reforms per se, and both have at times put pressure on Assad to engage the opposition more openly, if only as a hedged bet in case regime removal becomes inevitable. The United States criticizes this as being an

impediment to the Syrian uprising and asserts that Russian and Iranian involvement with Damascus is interfering with the inevitable exit of Assad. To an extent, this perception is partially accurate; many of the interests emerging from Moscow and Tehran are best served by maintaining the status quo in Syria and not by supporting opposition forces. But those interests do not exist simply to complicate US diplomatic life. The Russian and Iranian sides counter this accusation by focusing on US hypocrisy—each views the US so-called respect for democracy and support for Syrian opposition as simply a nationalist agenda, using rebel factions as proxies for the accomplishment of US objectives. Russia and Iran, quite frankly, are appearing to do the exact same thing but boldly declare that at least their agendas do not demand regime removal and potential transregional chaos laced with radical Islamism, which in their opinions is what has followed in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, and Libya.

Most interesting to this analysis is just how tightly correlative Russian and Iranian positions on Syria are to their chief diplomatic visions. Russia clings to Syria not so much because of any deep allegiance to Assad or any intense desire to protect the standing government, but to maintain its self-perception as a dominant global player capable of resolving international problems on a par with the United States. There are certainly commercial interests at play for Russia, but those endeavors are fueled by national policy not to accede the entire region to the United States. It is not even about maintaining port access for its reduced navy in the Mediterranean. Russia sees its rightful place as a diplomatic player with legitimate independent operating power and as the only state truly able to balance the influence of the United States in the Middle East. So there is an almost esoteric quality to this power calculation, beyond mere bullets and boatsheds. As such, while Russia's decisions may not be admired by those who want to see the Assad regime fall, they cannot be dismissed with cavalier accusations of Soviet nostalgia. There are real *modern foreign policy* goals and positioning in play for Russia when it comes to Syria.

Iran, if anything, has even more pressing real-world needs backing its decisions in Syria: issues of alliance, balancing, and nonstate actors become enmeshed in the competition for regional hegemony. Just as Russia wishes to pursue a globally strategic role through Syria, Iran is equally convinced of its rightful place as the one true legitimate candidate to assume the role of regional hegemon in the Middle East. In that desire,

it finds itself in direct competition with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, if not also perhaps with Qatar and the UAE. As such, these regional leadership and power concerns are by far the most influential when deciphering Iranian priorities in Syria. Outmaneuvering the United States is a game Tehran would enjoy winning, but it is not the driving force behind its strategy with Damascus. When the United States tries to make this discussion all about itself, it fails to see the true forces at play in the region. The consequences of such blindness are potentially stark for so much more than Syrian rebels; the future geopolitical environment of the region could shift based on calculating these agendas.

Perhaps most controversially, this study questions analyses that are too quick to dismiss the national interests of states like Iran and Russia when evaluating their foreign policy motivations. What is quietly implicit in such dismissals is a nationalistic chauvinism small-mindedly rejecting interests that truly matter.[40] This is not an attempt to intellectually balance against Western analysts; rather, it is recognition that double standards, contradictions, and hypocrisy are an *inevitable part of every state's foreign policy agenda.* One is not able to objectively view US involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, in Libya and Bahrain (just to name a few examples that immediately come to mind), and not see divergent foreign policy behavior influenced by diplomatic opportunism and status quo convenience. This is not so much a criticism against the United States as it is a reminder of how intellectually and diplomatically disingenuous it is to protest the same behavior from Iran and Russia as they pursue their own national objectives.

Finally, it is not a legitimate position to say, yes, it may be hypocritical and inconsistent, but at least part of the US foreign policy process is for democracy, human rights, and civil liberty. Therefore, it is fine to ignore US partial hypocrisy. Countries like Iran and Russia find such argumentation from the United States (ends justifying the means, basically) less than compelling, mainly because the United States tends to not allow others to use the same argumentation. Russian and Iranian positions on Syria are nothing except beholden to their own accounting of national interests, keeping their own priorities primary above all else. These interests are not based on an obsession with US policy per se. It is true that Russia and Iran are not the best thing for democracy in the Middle East, and they are not striving for freedom and civil liberties in Syria. But their agendas *are logical and rational for each country's national*

security interests and as such reveal how each envisions the future. That is why it is more important to produce analyses that do not automatically place the United States in the center of every other country's national security universe. Wiping away these Cold War and Ayatollah residues may not make the current situation and long-term future in Syria better, but it will make analysis much more clear and complete. SSQ

Notes

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