

# **Alliance Formations In The Middle Eastern Conflict: Emergence Of Iran-Russia Nexus**

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## **Abstract**

Middle East a region is the perfect example of turmoil due to on going chain of events. One particular event happens to be the Syrian Crisis which has now gotten out of control. Where the entire international community saw a state going to shambles—they also saw many alliances building up as an offshoot of this crisis. One particular alliance happens to be of two different states coming together for a similar cause. These states happen to be Iran and Russia which have gotten this close for the first time in history. Their alliance is marked with many strategic gains and political as well as diplomatic achievements. It will have some of the forementioned configurations for the Syrian conflict as well as implications for other states as well. Moreover, we will also be able to pin-point on the future of this alliance in the region by analyszing the scope of this nexus.

**Keywords** Iran-Russia, alliance formations, Syrian Crisis, conflict, Middle East

## **Introduction**

By looking at the history of Middle East as a region, one has no doubt of the fact that it is a region marked with conflict, vilolence, war and diplomatic gains coupled with resources. One such crisis happens to be the Syrian Conflict—which began with the influc of the Rab Spring and from then onwards, it evolved and has been doing so up until now. New realities emerged out of this conflict—ones which no one anticipated and ones which were clear from the beginning. And another reality happens to be of the alliances which formed due to this conflict.

Iran and Syria have been a very strong front since more than twenty five years and the Syria-Russia nexus is perhaps even older. And these two strategic partnerships played off well in the conflict itself. But out of this emerged a new nexus and that is of Russia and Iran. This was perhaps much anticipated because of the new realities that surround both states in this modern age. Without a doubt this new forged friendship is going to have some very repelling, yet forceful implications

for other already existing alliances as well as new ones. More over it is any ones guess as to figure out whether this is a strategic gain for both states for Syria or just a tactical one. But even then, on seems clear, as a result there will be a cause of some changing and perhaps even over –lapping dynamics for not only Syria but for the region as a whole. This paper is going to focus on these particular aspects of the alliance which is now emerging and not only that, it will touch upon its future and on what level will it have implications for other states.

## **Historical background**

The history of the relationship between Iran and Russia is one which is marred by ups and downs. If one goes to the timeline of Soviet-Persia relations set in the 1800's then the context of the relationship would be different. But the ones which developed in the post-Revolution and the post-Soviet eras would be completely re-designed and more contextual to the relavent era. Thus for a better understanding the study has been focused on the contemporary relations between the two.

In a time when the revolution was occurring in Iran, there was Communism which prevailed within Russia. In such a period, Iran's government had been pro-West which had been against Communism and the Soviet clout. The Communists tried to have some influence within Iran as well but this was only short lived. After the revolution, with Khomenei in charge, it seemed that their vision regarding Soviet Union and later on Russia was the same as the West. Yet the Russians, at that time the Soviets declared their goodwill by accepting the Revolution in Iran. The Iranian state categorically held the view, "Niether East Nor West!". Their association and ideals about Communism were claimed to be against the nature of the state of Iran and Islam as a whole. Since Communism held the opinion of a Godless and religion-less society which was not considered in good light with Iran. During the time of Iran-Iraq war, the kind of aid which Iran had desired from the Soviets was not permitted to it—thus Iran faced massive shocks and setbacks to its economy<sup>i</sup>.

More importantly, when Societ troops had invaded Afghanistan—Iran had considered Soviet "Great Satan" alongside US which was a major setback to their diplomatic partnership which was still developing. This was a time when Iran cut off oil supplies, diplomatic embassies and had closed down many Soviet Cultural Centers in Tehran<sup>ii</sup>. Yet these relations began to recover steadily after the Societ collapse.

At the time of the fall of the Union, things massively changed for Iran-Russia conflict. They both had a mutual enemy and that was US. So their relationship was a bit more on the strategic side. Even on issues regarding Central Asia, which is primarily a Roosoo zone of influence with Iran also having some interests—wanted to put a control on US involvement there. In the Middle Eastern context, Russia was first and foremostly inclined towards Syria and through Syria it held its influence within the region. One can not altogether ignore the importance of Iran for Russia in Middle East outrightedly, but Syria has to be given top priority in this aspect. Even though Iran had been a Russian sphere of influence at one time and its importance was multifold after the Soviet disintegration<sup>iii</sup>.

Russian-Iranian relations also have been ambiguous on the question of Iranian nuclear capabilities. Before the P5+1 Nuclear Deal Russia had always had more of a mixed stance. It did not favor this adventure of Iran as it always viewed that Iran having nuclear capabilities within the region would greatly undermine its own interests<sup>iv</sup>. There has been limited partnership between the two on the economic front but steady progress has been there in their military relations and there has been some rapprochement in the energy sector in 2009 as well<sup>v</sup>.

One thing must be noticed in this context and that is the importance of Realpolitik in the agendas of both states. The fact is that both have ideologies imbedded within their state structures which are completely opposite to each other. Yet for purposes of a common front, they did join forces before. For instance—US had always been one commonality in their agendas. And that perhaps is why they saw eye to eye in the first place. So all in all, their history has been implicit in ups and downs and it is extended to each sphere but strangely this history has always been shadowed by US-Iran or US-Russia relations.

### **Strategic Aspects in the Syrian Crisis**

The Syrian Crisis in a way can be looked up as a long overdue crisis which spread in the region as an of shoot of a fire which is still burning the region. The Arab Spring was supposed to change the regional dynamics and there is an assurity that it did so. But perhaps the Syrian Crisis and the way it kept getting out of hands was as unprecedented by the regime of Assad as well as the other powers in the region and the international arena. In this particular crisis the Iran-Russia nexus can be analyzed on four levels; firstly as single states i.e, Iran's individual role as well as that of Russia's, secondly as an actual axis soon after Russia jumped into the region and thirdly as an axis which is value ridden in the realm of politics, diplomacy and strategy.

The first level of analysis can be further divided into two parts; Iran's individual role and secondly Russia's individual role in the Syrian crisis. Initially this was much dire and in a way the nexus had been present but only in invisible undertones. In the initial markings of the Syrian crisis, Iranian stance was very much direct—it knew that it has to show support to the Assad regime at all costs. Their history with Syria has been one which began from a shaky start and from instances of pragmatism and diplomacy their bond with Syria over time gradually became a very strong front.

Their support to the regime has been vital because the regime had been a very strong support system for Iran. It began supporting Syria firstly through diplomatic and political ends and gradually it went further. It was pertinent for Iran that the rebels are curbed at the right time, otherwise the regime in Syria will face some serious time and as a result Iran's long time standing partnership would also fall. This is pointing towards the fact that Iran had grown largely dependent on the Syrian government and this added to its security as well. Iran not only sees in Syria a close ally but a partner for all times and a friend whom it can trust. It so happens that there is a persistent harmony of interest between the two. So for Iran if an ouster takes place, it would mean that the

other camp has won. This would eventually mean that an anti-Iran government could be installed within Syria. Things for Iran will get topsy turvy and the alliance will finally reach a breaking point. For Iran, Syria maintains a position of ultimate importance and it can be easily known through its policies regarding its neighbor. The fabric on which the Iranian dominance within the region has been wafted would get dismembered and this would place Iran in a very strange situation. Iran has helped the Syrian government economically and this has had adverse effects on its own economy as it has directly invested in the regime<sup>vi</sup>. Apart from that Iran has helped Syria extensively in the realm of military as well. “These labors have developed into an expeditionary training mission using Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Ground Forces, Quds Force, intelligence services, and law enforcement forces. The deployment of IRGC Ground Forces to conflict abroad is a notable expansion of Iran’s willingness and ability to project military force beyond its border”<sup>vii</sup>.

As for the individual role of Russia—it needs to be noted that Russia and Syria go a very long way back. They have strategic and political relations for more than forty years in the international arena. In this it must be known that they have managed to forge cultural, diplomatic and military ties with each other. Syria happens to be the only Arab state which Russia can count on as its standing partner in the region. If there is any way by which Russia could perhaps pursue any interests in the region, it would be through Syria. And this is exactly what the global community saw. With Russia and Syria there is some sort of regime connectivity that both can not ignore<sup>viii</sup>. Initially when civil war broke out in Syria and the regime was to be tried at ICJ by UN, China and Russia vetoed the move<sup>ix</sup>. Apart from that, Russia kept supporting Syria against ISIS and the other powers in a more political front by advocating for their cause.

It was in late 2015 when Russia shocked the entire world by entering physically inside Syria. This was to show their support to protect the regime but in fact this act had more motivation than just a single cause. Russia’s entry was seen as a threat by not only US which was keenly manouvering the situation but also that of K.S.A and ISIS as well as Al Nusra front which were somewhat involved within the crisis. ISIS which kept troubling the regime along with the involvement of Turkey was something that Russia needed to curb. And they did so, but in doing so they launched the crisis further into a humanitarian one by air strikes against ISIS and anti-regime forces. It was also considered that their presence in Homs and Latakia would push back the Nusra front moreover giving Russia a military passageway to the Mediterranean Sea<sup>x</sup>. The Russians had not only penetrated but also began to provide armament like grenade launchers, trucks, ammunitions—in a way military technical assistance to the pro regime Syrian fighters<sup>xi</sup>. This physical presence also did another thing— it opened doors for Iran and Russia to work together for a common cause.

Secondly, it is no big secret that Syria and Russia always had been on greater terms regarding strategic, political and even economical. But more than that Iran and Russia had strange relations since Iran considers the entire West as flawed and holds a grudge against it particularly the fact that Russia is a Socialist state, the ideals of which Iran does not get along with well. But lately Iran

has seen to go through a thaw with its relations with Russia. With the inclusion of Russia within the crisis situation, there has been a new front opening and that is of Iran-Syria-Russia. Once again there seems to be three power involvement in the conflict, wherein international help from Russia, regional from Iran and domestic from the regime itself. Strategically this is going to be extremely efficient for the Syrian regime—because this means that this new front which has been opened will be posing a threat to the balance of power situation in Middle East.

Finally when we talk of the strategic, political and diplomatic context then we can see that this nexus will take this rapprochement to do their best within Syria. Even though Russia has partially withdrawn from Syria—but this withdrawal would not have been possible had there not been a balance in partnership on Russia's part. One thing needs to be clearly understood and that is that both Iran and Russia have worked hard for a very long time to keep Syria by its side and for both Syria is a very important key<sup>xii</sup>. For that sole reason they know that Syria must never be left on its own terms thus there is an “overstretch of power” seen especially by Russian side. In political and diplomatic context, we see that this new alliance will have a great effect on the current scenarios as well as the future scenarios to come. What is the best feature is that there is going to be security-insecurity factor attached with it which will make the alliance move with a solid pace no matter what the circumstances. Because now it seems that Russian insecurity will directly be attached to that of Iran-Syria's and vice versa. And through Iran, Russia can sustain its position in the region<sup>xiii</sup>

In all of this, Iran's new enhanced role must not be ignored as well—and this is where the Iran-Russia alliance will have a meaningful might in the crisis. This was the very reason why the other powers were not only surprised but also insecure to the maximum extent. We can see that both Iran and Russia built a very beneficial cause for the operation; while Russia militarized the crisis, Iran politicised it by its diplomatic and pragmatic stance. This was the very cause which perhaps brought all states involved to the table to hold talks. It is pertinent that this was done so that from at least the Iranian and Russian side—not only there be security of their interests but diplomatic breakthrough occurs<sup>xiv</sup>. As it happens both states are champion at this cause.

### **Implications for Other Power Structures in the Region**

The new sought out axis which has emerged on the horizon of a very serious Middle Eastern crisis is going to form another power structure. Even if it sustains for a short period of time, this new relationship is going to have some implications for the already existing power structures. This is the perfect situation where there is an insecurity dilemma and a challenge or a threat to the balance which was already prevalent in Middle East. There happen to be many such structures; the already existing alliance of KSA and the US, and Israel.

For the KSA-US alliance which was a very strong front in Middle East this new alliance has some visible consequences in the region. US had previously made itself an entity which was keenly observing this conflict but not taking a physical part in it. When Russia entered into Syria, US had an instant insecurity which it could see by its confused state within Syria. Then there was another

factor to consider by the US—the Iranian growth of trust with Russia. For US, if this alliance is to continue then it will mean that US's own sphere of influence will begin to get undercut. This would mean that their power which was coupled with KSA will be now getting a cause to be challenged.

As for KSA, the already growing power of Iran is enough cause for distress within the region due to the uplift of economic sanctions on Iran. Then there is the Iranian factor which is distressing the Saudis inside Yemen as well. The Saudis also see that Iran is getting stability in context of power and importance in the region and with their newly built friendship with Russia would mean that KSA could be a major power replacement. This is a worrisome agenda for the Saudis, particularly with the internal issues prevalent within the House of Saud. This situation as a whole will mean economical implications for the KSA-US alliance. This the international community saw when KSA launched un-timely and ill-managed oil politics driven by insecurity and Iran, US and even Russia were caught up in its stakes. Most of all, US and its own Shale oil business was caught up in this gamble<sup>xv</sup>.

In a more strategic and political environment, KSA-US alliance is not the only strong alliance any more. The two entities together with other powers had tried to break apart the Syrian-Iranian alliance for a long time but failed and now it only seems to be getting more powers involved within. This means that their strategies for the region are getting challenged. The same is the case with the individual decisions of both states; US is now getting a clear picture of how its policies towards the region have been failures and KSA is getting the same picture—which means that both states will soon begin to realize that their alliance might be up for stagnation. The fact is out to be seen that there is no more leverage between the two and that for each other—each state is more like a liability than anything else.

This can be seen by the creation of a new Sunni alliance in the region by KSA. Surely their partnership with US is not broken but is sure stagnated. That is perhaps one reason why this move with the Sunni military alliance is seen as a reality. This new alliance is perhaps more on the sectarian ground, at least on the surface of things which is aimed at the Iranian led axis of Shiite states<sup>xvi</sup>. Iran in alliance with Syria, Hizbollah, Iraq and now with the support of Russia seems to be giving these states major insecurities. It seems that there is now a major division in power and the other states particularly KSA needs to keep the balance as it is. Because if it doesn't then there is a possibility that one power structure might get much more power within the region altogether disrupting the scheme of 'order'.

Another such state for which there will be certain implications due to this new power structure is definitely the State of Israel. Israel has had a very significant position in the region and perhaps it still does. But each time some new power is projected, there will be issues which Israel can not ignore. From this state of affairs, we can see one beneficiary in the Middle East which can easily exploit this situation. In such circumstances no state actually realizes how important the current state of affairs is for this particular state. This is due to the fact that all the states are busy in managing their own powerplay in the area. More interesting is the aspect that this state is viewed

as a mutual foe by all. The current scenario where there is a disparity among all states can at best have some very positive impacts for Israel.

If one strictly talks of the matter in religious context then we get to understand that an Islamic front which has become weak due to disputes and in efficiencies of states will prove to be a ripe ground for Israel to work its way into the entire dominant system of Middle East. Israel also has plans for expansion in the region and this will prove to frame a solid opportunity to make forth with such ideas. These factors are exactly the same ones for which the Arab states as well as Iran have been antagonized towards.

And in the context of an Iran-Russia rapprochement, it is dire for Israel to analyze all the contours of the new emerging power structure in the region. Iran is, and has always been a very anti-Israel state and Israel is not very keen on US giving Iran a leverage in the P5+1 Nuclear Deal. An Iran which is economically healthy and stable was not what Israel sought. And on top of that one which is friends with Russia and can have strategic partnership with it means insecurity for Israel. Chiefly an Israel which is at the moment has some stumbling relationship with US. Where at one time, Israel can exploit the division in the region it can also be the hitting point of the newly emerging structures.

### **Future of the Nexus**

There is no doubt that the future of this axis depends largely on the future of the region. The history of Middle East is full of incidents where we see different alliances being made and broken and made again. And the region is still a ripe ground for more alliances to be made or broken. This is due to the fact that Middle East is always surrounded by so much conflict that partnerships become a bare necessity for states to survive. In the same way, the Iran-Russia tactical-cum-strategic alliance can be analyzed.

In the first place, it must be acknowledged that this alliance was created for the best and common interest of Syria. Thus it was not for a very long term cause, but that does not mean that if the crisis is ever over then the alliance would automatically end. It might shift its ground on some new dynamics but from a tactical point it will move to a more strategic one. It also depends on the need which each state will have for each other in the future. A scenario in which the regime of Assad is replaced with one which is less inclined towards Iran or Russia would mean that the partnership will continue. Because then, for Russia, Iran will be the only Middle Eastern state to exert influence on and vice versa.

But if the regime of Assad does not fall and the crisis is resolved then there will be two scenarios out of the situation. At one end we may see the partnership being still carried on but rather slow-paced. Or at the other end the entire partnership will become stagnant at least in the realm of strategic powerplay. It may improve in economic realm but for both states there are brighter

opportunities to consider. In such a case, their relationship will become slow but maybe at a different time and crisis, rejuvenate.

In a situation where the crisis is not resolved in anyway then things will definitely become interesting. For one thing, Syria will still then be a very important state for both entities. They would both be exhausted and take a mutual fall in the region or completely retaliate against the anti-Assad forces. At this moment Russia has pulled its forces out of Syria partially and both Syria and Iran are okay with it on the surface. This might be at one end good for the peaceful end of the crisis, but at the same end it opens up a vacuum which Russia had filled up with its presence. With this move, this vacuum will certainly be back and can be taken massive advantage of by the ISIS. In such a scenario—the Iran-Russia partnership will again become dire. Because ISIS is at no point of defeat and in fact is still gaining more momentum. To curb this entity from the complete annihilation of the regional ‘peace’ the partnership will need to work out a means to work in a more complacent way and think beyond the immediate. For the utmost supremacy in the region, this is going to be very much necessary.

Overall, the partnership in the region will be seen as a mark of power as it already is. This means that there is something rather applaudable about the partnership. Whatever the situation may be, it is not in the near time going to break apart. Even if it takes a much longer period of time—it will not re-draw its pattern but sketch out a better one for its pre-eminence in the region. Iran is being seen as a coming power in the future and this will be taken as a plus for Russia if it retains good and sound relations with it.

## **Conclusion**

We find that Middle East is a very interesting region where different dynamics breed different alliances. And one such tactical-cum-strategic alliance is of Russia and Iran. They had relations before but their interactions have become more steady during and after the Syrian crisis. They will give birth to an altogether new structure within Middle East since their partnership will be contesting the already prevalent structures. Up until the crisis is not resolved, their growth will be stable, but it only depends on the kind of trends in Middle East that how far will the two states maintain their relations. It must be noted that both states hold a very prominent place in the future of international politics as multi-polarity governs it in the future. This will also mean that they will have to manage their relationship quite well and firstly try to resolve Syrian crisis as this state is key to their own alliance and secondly, see a way around if the crisis is not resolved.

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