

**IRAN, TURKEY, AND RUSSIA:
A CONVERGENCE OF INTERESTS**

The Unlikely Convergence of Russia, Iran, and Turkey: Scott B. McDonald, The National Interest, Feb. 18, 2019 - On February 14, 2019, leaders from three of Eurasia's major powers met at Russia's Black Sea resort of Sochi to discuss Syria. Russia, Iran and the Widening Trust Deficit in Syria: Ali Bakeer, TRT World, Feb. 12, 2019 — In an exclusive interview with CNN on January 25, Sergey Ryabkov, Russia's deputy foreign minister, dismissed the relationship between his country and Iran as an alliance.

Understanding the Russian-Iranian Relationship in Syria: Basel Haj Jasem, Daily Sabah, Mar. 8, 2019 — In the last few months, slight changes in the rhythm of the military scene in Syria have been observed in parallel to tranquility and a decline in the pace of military action.

The Regional Factors Bringing Turkey and Iran Together: Mohammed Ayoob, The Strategist, Dec. 12, 2018 — US President Donald Trump's policy of putting economic pressure on Iran to force regime change by inciting a domestic revolt seems to be failing.

On Topic Links

40 Years of Iranian Threats Against Israel and Few Pay Any Attention: Daniel S. Mariaschin, The Hill, Mar. 10, 2019 — Last month a conference in Warsaw brought together high-ranking officials from 60 countries, called to discuss the current chaos in the Middle East, and to zero in on the threat posed to the region by the regime in Tehran.

Iran's New Judiciary Chief Eyes Khamenei's Succession: Gareth Smythe, The Arab Weekly, Mar. 10, 2019 — Confirmation from Iran's judiciary spokesman that Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appointed Ebrahim Raeisi as the new judiciary chief appears to boost Raeisi's national stature as a possible successor to Khamenei.

A Regime Still Fighting the 'Great Satan': Gerald F. Seib, Wall St. Journal, Mar. 1, 2019 — The sun had just set in Tehran when the car screeched up alongside me in the parking lot of the old Hilton Hotel. Four men dressed in camouflage uniforms jumped out, grabbed me, threw me face-down into the back seat and sped away.
Anatomy of Iran's Deception and How Iran Benefited: David Albright, et al, FDD, Dec. 19, 2018 — Iran's Nuclear Archive contains considerable new information about its past nuclear weapons program including documentary evidence showing Iran's deceptions in its declarations to the International Atomic Energy Agency

(IAEA) about its past military nuclear activities.

**THE UNLIKELY CONVERGENCE OF
RUSSIA, IRAN, AND TURKEY**

Scott B. McDonald

The National Interest, Feb. 18, 2019

On February 14, 2019, leaders from three of Eurasia's major powers met at Russia's Black Sea resort of Sochi to discuss Syria. In attendance were the host, President Vladimir Putin, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Iran's President Hassan Rouhani. While Syria was the main focus of the meeting, the summit represents an important development in Eurasian affairs, the increasing convergence of national interests between Iran, Russia and Turkey. Indeed, it comes at a time when the European Union (EU) and the United States are close to agreeing on new sanctions against Russia, Iran is celebrating forty years of revolution and vowing its defiance to the West by announcing a continued missiles buildup and influencing of regional affairs, and the Erdogan government has launched another round of arrests linked to the failed 2016 coup attempt.

Although this grouping is hardly a close-knit alliance, it provides a counterpoint of sorts to the rise of Chinese power in the East and to a Europe in the West undergoing an identity crisis. It also provides a counterpoint to the United States, which under the Trump administration has indicated an interest in pulling its troops out of Syria and Afghanistan. To be certain, Iran, Russia and Turkey have different objectives in Syria, but they also have overlapping goals in the rest of Eurasia, run the risk of becoming economic extensions of China, and all three have strained relations with the West.

The United States and the European Union have imposed economic sanctions against Russia for its interference in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. They are considering new sanctions in response to Moscow's aggression against Ukraine in the Sea of Azov. The Trump administration has re-imposed sanctions against Iran and for a brief period it had imposed sanctions against top officials in the Turkish government (later dropped). The costs of sanctions have varied from country to country, but they decidedly hurt Russian and Iranian growth prospects.

Sanctions have been difficult for Iran, which has long found itself frozen out of global economic trade and investment for its engagement in terrorism,

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development of ballistic and nuclear weapons programs and interference in the affairs of other countries in the region. President Donald Trump's decision to leave the nuclear deal with Iran negotiated by the Obama administration (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015) has meant a re-imposition of tough U.S. sanctions against Iran, which are squeezing an economy that has been marked in recent years by slow growth, rising inflation, high unemployment and mismanagement. Iran's currency, the rial, lost considerable value in late 2018, a development that has made imports, including food, more costly.

While Turkey remains a major trade partner for Europe, relations between the two are strained. Ankara's application for EU membership, initially filed in 1987, has gone nowhere due to concerns over the impact of a large Muslim country entering the trade bloc as well as the large role the military traditionally played in Turkey's political affairs. The increasingly autocratic nature of President Erdogan's government has also been a point of friction. At the same time, there was irritation in Turkey over what was deemed to be a slow show of support by the West when the Erdogan government narrowly averted a coup attempt in 2016. Consequently, Turkey looked east, seeking to gain greater influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. In this, relations with Russia and Iran assumed greater importance from a trade and investment perspective. It should also be noted that Turkey also seeks to play a role in those parts of Eastern Europe which still have Muslim minorities (Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Kosovo).

Turkey has also been more willing to consider the purchase of Chinese and Russian arms, which has strained relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Indeed, there have been voices that have suggested that Turkey should leave NATO.

While relations have soured with the West, China is another force that has pushed Iran, Russia and Turkey closer. In the early twenty-first century, China is flexing its economic and political muscles as it seeks to revive the old Silk Roads that linked China and Europe in one vast transportation and trade network... [To read the full article, click the following LINK - Ed.]

RUSSIA, IRAN AND THE WIDENING TRUST DEFICIT IN SYRIA

Ali Bakeer

TRT World, Feb. 12, 2019

In an exclusive interview with CNN on January 25, Sergey Ryabkov, Russia's deputy

foreign minister, dismissed the relationship between his country and Iran as an alliance.

Referring to the term alliance, Ryabkov told the American channel “I wouldn’t use this type of words to describe where we are with Iran.”

The Russian official affirmed that Moscow and Tehran are not on the same page regarding everything in Syria, and his country does not “underestimate the importance of measures that would ensure very strong security of the state of Israel,” stressing that this is “one of the top priorities of Russia.”

Ryabakov’s remarks coincide with three noticeable developments in Syria. First, the renewal of clashes between pro-Russia and pro-Iran Syrian forces and militias in the Al Ghab plain. Second, the escalation of the conflict between Israel and Iran, in which Israel responded to a medium-range Iranian missile fired from a place near Damascus towards the occupied Golan by bombing Iranian targets inside Syria as well as Syrian air defenses. Third, the increasing talk about the safe zone area in Northern Syria between Turkey, America and Russia which apparently marginalises Iran from Tehran’s perspective.

The developments highlight the widening gap between Russia and Iran and the increasingly conflicted interests of both countries inside Syria. Indeed, Moscow never considered Tehran an ‘ally’ as relations between them have always complicated. Depending on what point in history you choose to look at, the relationship has ranged from enmity to competition and from exploitation to friendship. During all the ups and downs, however, the only thing that remains constant is a lack of trust between the two nations.

Although Iran and Russia intervened in Syria to save Assad, they don’t have the same agenda for Syria. The two countries are competing in Syria over leadership, influence over the Assad regime, economic interests, and other issues. The Russians, in particular, seem to be more open to make compromises that benefit their national interests at the expense of Iran. The fact that Moscow is not blocking Israel’s military attacks against Iran and its proxies in Syria is quite telling.

When the Russian foreign minister phoned his Iranian counterpart to ask him to come up with an official statement to support the Russian-Turkish understating in Aleppo at the end of 2016, Zarif replied that Iran won’t support an agreement it is not party to. At the time, Iranians with their Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

fighters, regional proxies, and local militias were the strongest foreign country on the ground in Syria, and they tried to sabotage the deal through Hezbollah and other militias before Moscow and Ankara agreed to add Tehran to a trilateral mechanism later.

Iran still maintains a direct presence on the ground and exercises broad influence over events in Syria. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Tehran's current status in Syria is degraded mainly for three reasons. First, Russia has recently progressed in its efforts to increase its influence within the Assad regime's institutions. Second, the Israelis are systematically targeting Iran and its proxies inside the country. Third, Turkey is building up its direct military presence in northern Syria and is increasing its role and influence there.

These developments make Iran nervous and doubtful of its relationship with Russia. Some might argue that Moscow is not interested or does not have the ability to kick Iran out of Syria, yet, it certainly has an interest to decrease Iran's influence and to utilize that to its interest.... [To read the full article, click the following LINK - Ed.]

UNDERSTANDING THE RUSSIAN-IRANIAN RELATIONSHIP IN SYRIA

Basel Haj Jasem

Daily Sabah, Mar. 8, 2019

On the last few months, slight changes in the rhythm of the military scene in Syria have been observed in parallel to tranquility and a decline in the pace of military action.

But the most important thing is the Russian-Israeli talks, where Israel demanded the removal of Iranian militias from the Syrian border. At that time, the Russian foreign minister said that "only the Syrian army should protect the south of the country," as if he was telling Iran, who supported the Syrian regime for years beside Russia, to leave the south. Immediately afterward, news of an agreement between Israel and Russia came out under which Iran would withdraw from southern Syria and the Bashar Assad regime would take control over the region. And in an interview with the Tass news agency, the Israeli Ambassador to Moscow asserted that Israel was satisfied with Russia's position on the Iranian military presence on the Israeli-Syrian border. He pointed out that Israel and Russia are engaged in intensive discussions on this issue, while stressing that the presence of Iranian forces in the region is "targeting Israel."

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Many believe that the relationship between Russia and Iran may rise to what might be called an alliance, but with detailed analysis it appears to be inaccurate. Russia and Iran are trying to hide their differences as much as possible, but some differences come up from time to time.

A new round of confrontation with Iran began in September 2015, when Russia decided to launch a military operation in Syria. Although Assad is also an ally of Iran, views in Moscow and Tehran differ on post-war arrangements in Syria. The Russian military presence in Syria has also made Iran move to a rear position. Contrary to the expectations of the Russian side, Iran has not bought Russian aircraft since the lifting of sanctions on Iran, preferring European Airbus aircraft in a deal worth \$25 billion. Additionally, Russia was badly affected by Iran's desire to achieve a significant increase in oil exports after the lifting of sanctions.... [To read the full article, click the following LINK - Ed.]

**THE REGIONAL FACTORS BRINGING
TURKEY AND IRAN TOGETHER**

Mohammed Ayoob

The Strategist, Dec. 12, 2018

US President Donald Trump's policy of putting economic pressure on Iran to force regime change by inciting a domestic revolt seems to be failing. There is little doubt that renewed sanctions have hurt Iran economically, as witnessed above all by the precipitate fall of the Iranian currency in their wake. However, economic pressure has not led to a revolt against the regime and the currency has stabilised after the initial shock. Indeed, the American action may have consolidated support behind the regime, which can now deflect criticism of its economic performance on to the imposition of American sanctions.

In this context, Iran's relations with Turkey provide a very interesting case study. Both Tehran and Ankara have regional ambitions that have sometimes led to friction between them, as was the case over Syria until recently. However, economic complementarities and congruence of strategic interests have helped to keep their relationship on a relatively even keel.

When the Trump administration announced that it was going to reimpose sanctions on Iran, Turkey made it clear that it wouldn't follow American diktats but would comply only with sanctions imposed by the UN. Economic interdependence provides part of the explanation for the Turkish stand. Bilateral trade between Iran and Turkey isn't limited to oil and gas. The volume of trade between the two

neighbours stood at US\$11.7 billion at the end of 2017, up from US\$9.7 billion in 2016, and both countries have committed to eventually raising the level to US\$30 billion.

However, it's not just oil and trade that determine Turkish-Iranian relations; there's also a convergence of political objectives. Turkish and Iranian strategic interests coincide on Kurdish secessionism, which threatens the territorial integrity of both countries. That's why Iran didn't oppose Turkish incursions into Syria to prevent the creation of a Kurdish enclave abutting its borders, even when the two countries supported opposite sides during the civil war. Now that Turkey is reconciled to Iran's ally Bashar al-Assad remaining in power in Syria, the major political disagreement between Ankara and Tehran has lost its importance.

Iran's support to Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the time of the failed coup in July 2016 greatly helped in patching up differences. The Iranian foreign minister stayed up all night as the coup was unfolding to monitor the Turkish situation and telephoned his Turkish counterpart five times to express Iran's support for the government, thus strengthening personal bonds between the leaders of the two countries.

There's also an increasing conjunction of interests between the two countries vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia. Tehran has been engaged for years in a fierce competition with Riyadh over primacy in the Gulf and over their respective roles in the wider Middle East. Syria had been the primary battleground for their rivalry since 2011. Now that the Syrian civil war is almost over, Yemen has become the major arena of conflict between them. Saudi Arabia and its ally the United Arab Emirates are engaged in open warfare with the Houthis who are in control of the Yemeni capital and are supported by Iran. The Saudi-UAE aerial bombardments have ravaged an already desperately poor country, killing thousands of civilians. An estimated eight million people are on the verge of starvation.

Ankara has increasingly come to see Riyadh as its primary antagonist in the competition for influence in the Sunni countries of the Middle East. It finds Tehran a useful ally in tying down Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf, thus making it easier for Turkey to emerge as the preeminent Sunni power in the rest of the region... [To read the full article, click the following LINK - Ed.]