

Страны и регионы мира: динамика развития и модели взаимодействия

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The influence of US policy on the formation of a common approach between Iran and Russia to resolve the Syrian crisis

Zahra Ghiasi

*The cultural representation in the Embassy of Iran in the Russian Federation,
Moscow, Russia, zhr.ghiasii@gmail.com*

Abstract. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the US has always played the most important and influential role in the Iran-Russia relations. From the second half of the 1990s, one of the US foreign policy priorities has constantly been on the separation and divergence in the Iran-Russia relations, for which the US spared no efforts. Since the synergy of powers between the two countries and their anti-unipolar policies have always been a serious threat to the US hegemony at a global level, by the beginning of the Syria crisis in late 2010, following the Arab Spring, the US interests and goals were directly at odds with Iran's and Russia's political and security interests. The goals of Washington in the Syria crisis included: the decline of the Syrian government, the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, and an effort to establish a pro-Western government to eliminate the sole ally of Russia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and also to prevent Iran's regional penetration, particularly its proxy groups like Hezbollah. For achieving these goals, Washington has profited from its allied countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, as a front line. The US strategy in Syria not only exacerbated the crisis but also provided a situation in which Iran and Russia achieved their highest level of military and security cooperation in the past three decades. And it was precisely the same incident that the US considered a serious threat to its national interests and policies. Although Iran and Russia have pursued specific and sometimes contradictory interests, in the end, focusing on common goals and threats – arising from the Syrian crisis – they were able to cooperate effectively and take a new step in building a strategic unity.

Keywords: Iran, Russia, Syrian crisis, United States of America, Middle East

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Влияние политики США на формирование общего подхода Ирана и России к разрешению сирийского кризиса

Гияси Захра

*Культурное представительство Посольства Ирана в РФ,
Москва, Россия, zhr.ghiasii@gmail.com*

Аннотация. После распада Советского Союза США всегда играли самую важную и влиятельную роль в отношениях Ирана и России. Со второй половины 90-х годов одним из приоритетов внешней политики США постоянно был раскол и расхождение в ирано-российских отношениях, для чего США не жалели сил. Поскольку синергия держав двух стран и их антиоднополярная политика всегда представляли серьезную угрозу гегемонии США на глобальном уровне, к началу сирийского кризиса в конце 2010 г., последовавшего за «арабской весной», интересы и цели США прямо противоречили политическим интересам и интересам безопасности Ирана и России. Цели Вашингтона в сирийском кризисе включали в себя: падение сирийского правительства, свержение Башара Асада и попытку создать прозападное правительство для устранения единственного союзника России после распада Советского Союза, а также чтобы предотвратить региональное проникновение Ирана, особенно групп, поддерживаемых Ираном, таких как «Хезболла». Для достижения этих целей Вашингтон воспользовался преимуществами своих стран-союзников в регионе, таких как Саудовская Аравия, Катар и Турция, в качестве линии фронта. Стратегия США в Сирии не только усугубила кризис, но и создала ситуацию, в которой Иран и Россия достигли самого высокого уровня сотрудничества в военной сфере и сфере безопасности за последние три десятилетия. И именно этот инцидент США посчитали серьезной угрозой своим национальным интересам и политике. Хотя Иран и Россия преследовали конкретные, а иногда и противоречивые интересы, в конечном счете, сосредоточившись на общих целях и угрозах, возникших в результате сирийского кризиса, они смогли эффективно сотрудничать и сделать новый шаг в построении стратегического единства.

Ключевые слова: Иран, Россия, сирийский кризис, Соединенные Штаты Америки, Ближний Восток

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Introduction

During the last three decades, Iran and Russia have had vicissitudinous relations in which the US played a major role in their convergence or divergence. What is evident is Washington's attempts at building tension and diverging Iran-Russia relations. The first footprints of such attempts can be seen at the Gore–Chernomyrdin commission in 1995. This diplomacy, which resulted in a four-billion-dollar economic loss to Russia and the isolation of Iran, led to a kind of distrust in their future relations. Washington has followed this diplomacy with its other Middle East allies such as Saudi Arabia and Israel.

However, with the onset of the Arab Spring and the spread of protests to Syria as the remaining ally for Russia from the era of the Soviet Union and the sole strategic ally for the Islamic Republic of Iran, a new path began in Iran–Russia relations. With the direct and indirect entry of regional and trans-regional forces and the formation and progression of terrorist groups such as ISIS* and Jabhat an-Nusra**, Iran and Russia's national and security interests were in danger. Contrary to Washington's expectations and forecasts, with the military entry of Russia into the Syria crisis in September 2015 and the beginning of military and political cooperation between Moscow and Tehran, these two countries formed a single front to confront shared threats.

Taking a look at the US role in Iran-Russia relations

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the US has always played the most important and influential role in Iran-Russia relations. Even relations between countries like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Europe with Iran and Russia have been affected by the United States.

Policies of the Russian Federation in the initial years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union – in Yeltsin's government – were aimed

*Признана в России террористической организацией.

**Признана в России террористической организацией.

at normalizing relations with the West and depreciating the East in the dominant Euro-Atlantic discourse that in turn was regarded as the most favorable alternative for Washington officials. In particular, these policies aimed at diverging from the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Middle East – as an independent country – which was even promoting anti-Western policies in the region. In essence, Washington, in addition to isolating Iran, could also begin its separatist policies over Iran-Russia relations by exerting influence over Kremlin officials, something which has been on the US agenda since the second half of the 90s [Roy 2004]. The first fruits of US efforts are observable in the Gore–Chernomyrdin commission, signed between the US and Russia in Washington in 1995¹. According to the commission, Russia was committed to putting an end to its prior military contracts with Iran until 1999 without entering into any new arms deals with it. However, the rise of Vladimir Putin to power, on the one hand, and the focus of dominant Russian elites and officials on Eurasianism, on the other hand, led to the formation of multilateral policies and freedom from commitment to the West. In reality, Kremlin officials concluded that for ending the unipolar order shaped by the United States of America, it was necessary to put the Look to the East policy on their agenda to reduce US power. As a result of changing such perspective, Russia has to strive to follow good relations and new cooperation with independent actors who do not have strategic convergence with the West. Thus, the relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has an independent policy from the West and is the leading opposer of US policies, particularly in the Middle East, has doubled in importance. By pursuing the new policy, Washington felt threatened by the close relationships between the two countries and put some measures on the table. Washington efforts to create a divergence in Tehran–Moscow relations included: The Gore–Chernomyrdin commission in 1995, to prevent the delivery of the Russian research reactor to Iran in 1998, to emphasize the danger of Shiite thinking, especially its spread to the North Caucasus and Post-Soviet states, to put Russia under duress in canceling the delivery of the S-300 missile defense system, to encourage Russia to vote against Iran in the United Nations Security Council Resolution in 1929, and to fine Russia if it tries to have close relationships with Iran, for instance sanctioning Russian companies connected with Iran, like the sanction of ROSOBORONEXPORT company (the Russian state company in

¹ Broder J.M. Despite a secret Pact by Gore in '95, Russian arms Sales to Iran Go On // NY Times. 13.10.2000. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/13/world/despite-a-secret-pact-by-gore-in-95-russian-arms-sales-to-iran-go-on.html> (Accessed 18 Oct. 2023).

exports and defense-related products) in 2006 [Shad 2019]. But after more cooperation and close relationships between Iran and Russia since 2015, the pursuit of earlier plans intensified, resulting in new measures to escalate tension in their relations. Following is a brief discussion of a few of these new measures:

- to encourage the Israel and Arab states of the Persian Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia, to increase their trades with the Russian Federation and convince Kremlin officials to overthrow Bashar al-Assad and not comply with Iran;
- Donald Trump promised to lift Russian sanctions if the Kremlin prevents Iran from penetrating the region;
- imposing joint sanctions against Iran and Russia²;
- to emphasize the threat of an independent and powerful Iran for Russia, especially Iran's potential replacement for exporting gas to Europe instead of Russia;
- focusing on the occidental front in Iran and Russia, who believe in the trustworthiness of the United States and its extensive capacity to enhance the internal situation of both countries;
- making use of Media potentials, especially Hollywood, for showing a dangerous, unreliable, and unpredictable figure from Russian officials;
- to provoke the feelings of Iranian and Russian people against each other by stressing historical records, especially the Treaties of Gulistan and Turkmenchay, also utilizing independent and dependent media and news agencies;
- using the capacities of the countries that comply with the United States of America to pose barriers to the expansion of relations between Iran and Russia, especially when it comes to nuclear, military, and technical cooperation.

Furthermore, the United States House of Representatives, via the National Defense Authorization Act for Year 2017, devoted a budget for monitoring the level and type of cooperation between Iran and Russia. Accordingly, the United States secretary of defense and secretary of state had to deliver a report jointly about Iran-Russia cooperation to Congress. Briefly, topics included in the report are: the level of interaction between two countries concerning the Iran Ballistic Missile Program; to survey *the Information Exchange Center* that was

² Solomon J. U.S. eyes Russia-Iran split in bid to end Syria conflict: Washington Middle East allies aim to coax Putin to support limits on Tehran-backed Assad time in power // Wall Street Journal. 19.11.2015. URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-eyes-russia-iran-split-in-bid-to-end-syria-conflict-1447895357> (Accessed 18 Oct. 2023).

established in Baghdad by Iran, Russia, Syria, and Iraq; to analyze maritime cooperation between Iran and Russia, and the conduct of joint naval maneuvers between these two countries, especially its effect on the expansion of Russian naval forces in the East of the Mediterranean Sea and Iran naval forces in the Persian Gulf; to observe the cooperation between two countries since the onset of the Syrian crisis; to examine the level of collaboration between Russia and Hezbollah³.

The Syria crisis and the US strategy

By looking at the history of relationships between Syria and the United States of America, it becomes evident that Syria has been of great importance for the US from the beginning to meet Israel's security, and then for approaching the Eastern bloc and signing various military as well as economic contracts. After the September 11 attacks, Syria was on the top of the list of countries introduced as dangerous enemies of the United States. More specifically, the US asked Syria to close the agencies of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine, which in the US and its allies' perspective, were considered terrorist organizations. However, when Syria refused to undertake such an action, and especially after the occupation of Iraq when Syria allowed thousands of resistance volunteers to enter into Iraq from its border, as well as when almost one million Iraqis sought asylum in Syria, the relationship between the two countries deteriorated [Ahmadi, 2010]. Therefore, the US sanctions against Syria started, and its economic problems aggravated than ever before.

With the onset of the Arab Spring from the Southwest of Asia and North Africa in 2010, the course of changes in the Middle East intensified. Due to several factors, including strategic position, economic problems, ethnic and tribal cleavages, the growth of Islamic extremism, and foreign intervention, Syria was one of the countries deeply involved in the crisis [Mirkushesh, Nokande, Kalai 2018]. But among all the countries involved in the crisis, Syria was the only country where immediately after the inception of mass protests in Daraa, it delved into parallel armed conflicts simultaneously. Protesters quickly became armed with all kinds of weapons, and terrorist groups transferred speedily to Syria. For a short while, armed conflicts extended to various Syrian cities. Such circumstances did not happen in

³ National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017. URL: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/2943/text> (Accessed 18 Oct. 2023).

any other countries involved in the crisis of the Arab Spring. From the beginning of the Syria crisis, the US policy was that its allied regional countries – especially Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar – proceed with the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad. Also the US logistic, armed and instructional help was vested in these countries and the Syrian regime opponents [Deheshyar 2015].

At a global level, the goal of the West in toppling the Assad administration was to develop its hegemony against the remaining Eastern bloc. And at a regional level, the goal was to encounter the increasing geopolitics of Iran and the resistance front [Ashrafi, Babazade 2015]. Indeed, the United States of America was well aware of Syria's geopolitical and geostrategic position for both Iran and Russia.

Concerning Russia: Syria is the only associate remained for Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the Middle East that has had extensive political and diplomatic relationships with the country. The Soviet Union had its first arms deal with Syria in 1954 that the process of selling weapons still continues up to the present time. And Syria is considered as one of the main markets for Russian arms. From 2007 to 2012, Russia supplied 78% of Syria's weaponry [Ghasemiayn, Simbor 2018]. Since 1971, Tartus port was shared by Russian forces, leading to Russia's access to the Mediterranean Sea and its increasing penetration in the Middle East. Generally, Syria and Russia's relationships from the dissolution of the Soviet Union till now have been of vital importance in three essential axes: arms industry, trade relations, and Tartus port.

But concerning Iran, Syria stands at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Iran and Iraq's reliance on Syria for oil and gas transmission to Europe has paramount economic importance for Iran. Iran has spent at least \$3000 on building gas pipelines to Syria [Esmailpur 2017]. Moreover, Syria is the only Arab country with independent relations; and it is Iran's strategic ally in the region that has always collaborated with the Islamic Republic of Iran and its related forces to support Palestinians. Syria is considered a safe route for transporting equipment of these forces. However, conversely, Syria is regarded as a dangerous and threatening path for the US regional ally, i. e., Israel. In the US view, political instability in Syria means more siege of Iran and Hamas, and therefore more security for Israel. On the other hand, it means preventing the reinforcement of the Axis of Resistance, which has severely threatened Saudi Arabia, the most important ally of the United States in the region.

In addition, some believe that the most significant economic and political rival of the US in the East is the Shanghai Pact, which considers Iran and Russia as its eastern gates, and attempts to reduce the amount of Western political and economic interventions in Asia. Therefore,

the decline of Syria and consequently Iran is the main priority of the United States [Amini, Aghaalkhani, Ebrahimi 2013]. Given the course of incidents and the activation of terrorists throughout Syria, Iranian and Russian officials were concerned about protests led by regional and trans-regional forces. Because Syria's civil war was not between people, ethnicities, Shias, and Sunnis, but it was between foreign terrorists, along with some separated forces from the Syrian Army backed as Bashar al-Assad opponents by the US and its regional allies such as Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia [Abdollahian 2020]. In this regard, rebel groups generally considered Russia alongside Iran as the principal supporters of the Assad regime. In their view, Iran and Russia were the leading agents for the effective agreement because Bashar Assad's government takes their word. Therefore, it was not possible to achieve a deal without their intermediary. In Russia's military intervention in September 2015, the Syrian opposition regarded Russia as the most influential political supporter of Bashar al-Assad that vetoes United Nations Security Council resolutions concerning Assad's condemnation or fault [Tabrizi, Pantucci 2016].

Thus, with the knowledge that Syrian protests are being led by these countries, the Islamic Republic of Iran stood by the Syrian government right from the start. Iran announced its diplomatic and political support for the country that gradually obtained financial and military backing after. It is interesting to note that the indirect entry of the United States into the Syria crisis with the goal of Assad's downfall, on the one hand, led to the extension of conflicts, the weakening of Syrian military forces, the destruction of Syrian infrastructures, and industries. On the other hand, in the post-war era, the Syrian nation has to spend decades rebuilding Syria again. Thus, this means a weak Syria and also the elimination of threats against Israel [Sajedi 2013]. But the other important goal of the US in elongating the crisis was to incur financial, military, and human losses for Iran and its related forces. Because by elongating the Syrian crisis, Iran has no choice but to supply its armed forces financially, in addition to wrestling with undesirable internal economic problems. Additionally, it has to encounter the threat of terrorist groups approaching its borders. And all these cases were scheduled with the goal of reducing Iran's regional penetration.

With Russia's military entry in September 2015 that was unexpected for the West and even for countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the situation changed dramatically. Earlier, Russia relied solely on providing political and diplomatic support for the Syrian government and vetoed every United Nations Security Council resolution against the Syrian government. But since 2015, military and operational cooperation have started between Iran, Russia, and Syria's state army. As a

result, the retake of Aleppo in favor of Syria and the repetitive defeats of terrorist groups like ISIS* are worthy of mention. Russia's military entry into the Syria crisis to help the Bashar Assad government, fighting with terrorist groups, and confronting the West led to Iran and Russia's alliance within a single front for the first time, aggravating US concerns about Iran–Russia close relationships. From the viewpoint of US officials, Iran and Russia's strategic closeness in the Syria crisis was unprecedented in their 500-year relationship. Notably, Iran and Russia's cooperation in Syria reached the point that a foreign country used Iranian air force bases to raid another country. Several Russian bombers took off from Hamadan Noje airbase to attack ISIS* positions⁴. The Syrian crisis has changed the historical course for the region's future generations. Because of the Syrian crisis, millions of Syrian people were killed, wounded, or displaced. Regional sectarianism aggravated, and the danger of war between Iran and Israel increased. It led to the worst refugee crisis since world war II and created a new and horrible wave of brutal radicals whose influence will transgress the region⁵. And all of these will adversely affect US interests. The US did not succeed in either calming the Syrian crisis or directing it in a way that was in line with US interests. But with the weakening of opposing forces, the enhancement of terrorists and extremists related to Al-Qaeda***, the Syrian crisis led to the revival of terrorist fundamentalism. In other words, the recovery of a global movement that the United States of America – after years of fighting and spending high costs-had strived to uproot or control after the September 11 attacks [Kushki, Karimi 2014].

Conclusion

The close relationship between Iran and Russia is a dangerous strategic threat for the US in the mid and long term. Thus, monitoring the cooperation between the two countries in various fields has been the main priority of American foreign policy in the past years. As a result, the US spared no efforts to build divergence and take advantage of conflicts between Iran and Russia. But with the onset of the Syria

⁴ Katz Y., Bohbot A. How Israel sold Russia drones to stop missiles from reaching Iran // Jerusalem Post. 2017. 3 Feb.

⁵ Itani F., Rosenblatt N. US policy in Syria: A seven-year reckoning // Atlantic Council. 10.09.2018. URL: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/us-policy-in-syria-a-seven-year-reckoning/> (Accessed 18 Oct. 2023).

***Признана в России террористической организацией.

crisis, a new path started in Iran and Russia relations. US goals and foreign policy in the Syria crisis, based upon the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad and the expansion of terrorist and extremist groups, caused common threats for Iran and Russia arising from these goals. Therefore, Iran and Russia stood together for the first time in the Middle East to have close military and intelligence cooperation against the West and its regional allies. In essence, it can be stated that-despite its recent attempts to prevent close relations between Russia and Iran – the US strategy in the Syria crisis provided a situation that these two countries could experience a new level of military cooperation. This cooperation, in turn, led to the revival of Russia's power in the Middle East and Iran's increasing penetration in the region. In the Libya crisis, Washington convinced Moscow not to veto Resolution 1973. Therefore, Russia lost its old ally. With the onset of the Syria crisis, Washington strived not to involve Russia directly in the conflict. However, by military entrance into the Syria crisis and the bombardment of ISIS* positions, Russia announced its official entry. And hence, Iran and Russia stood united on a single front.

But it has to be noted that the structure of the international system does not always allow states to have friendships and permanent strategic cooperation. Because in an anarchic system, states constantly follow their interests and are willing to increase their power. Thus, the cooperation will continue until power and national interests warrant so. Indeed, Iran and Russia approached together tactically and temporarily because of common threats arising from this crisis to encounter with the West. But for building a real strategic relationship between two countries, with the minimum impressibility from the West, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation must strive to create a roadmap based upon their shared interests in Western Asia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. And in addition to military and operational cooperation, they need to take significant steps to improve economic, commercial, and culture collaboration.

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Информация об авторе

Захра Гияси, Культурное представительство Посольства Ирана в РФ, Москва, Россия; 129110, Россия, Москва, Больничный пер., д. 7; zhr.ghiasii@gmail.com

Information about the author

Zahra Ghiasi, The cultural representation of the Iran Embassy in Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia; bld. 7, Bolnichny Lane, Moscow, Russia, 129110; zhr.ghiasii@gmail.com