



## PERSPECTIVES

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### **Photo-Ops Notwithstanding, Iran Faces the US Alone**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Iran is now assessing whether it should retaliate further against the US for the targeting of Qassem Soleimani, and if so, how. Its relationships with Russia and Turkey might look warm, but they are troubled. Neither is likely to leap to Tehran's side in its clash with the US. Israel should exploit Iran's fissures with Russia and Turkey to its advantage.

The era of superpower confrontation hardly elicits nostalgia. The Cold War did, however, possess one redeeming quality: clarity. It was relatively easy to identify friends and form alliances to cement those relationships. This was clearly the case in the Middle East: Syria, Iraq, Nasser's Egypt, and Algeria were clearly on the Soviet side; Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and Morocco were on the Western side.

In today's Middle East, that clarity has given way to murk.

Consider the numerous summits between Vladimir Putin, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to broker truces in Syria. They all feature plenty of smiles and photos of handshakes.

And there is some substance to that warmth. Turkey, after all, purchased the Russian S-400 air-defense system in defiance of Washington. Trump, long regarded as a friend of Erdoğan's, retaliated by scuttling the sale of F-35s to Turkey—a wise precaution, as Washington cannot possibly sell planes designed to avoid the S-400 to a country that may well turn around and use its access to those planes to help the Russians improve their ability to down it.

Russia presumably enjoys a warm relationship with Iran as well, at least on the nuclear front. It embraced the nuclear agreement of 2015 and staunchly and

consistently denounced economic sanctions against Iran in both 2012, when they were originally imposed, and in 2017, when they were reapplied.

The same can be said of Turkish-Iranian relations. Ankara is often blamed for being a commercial and financial conduit that enables Tehran to ease the bite of the US-led sanctions. Istanbul Airport is Iran's primary gateway to Europe.

But the actions of these three countries in the wars on the ground in the Middle East tell a different story.

In Syria, Turkey is basically waging a proxy war against Syria and its Russian ally. Russian sorties are at the forefront of the campaign against the last Sunni rebel stronghold in Idlib, most of whom are armed and financed by the Turks.

There is nothing new about this proxy war. It began with the massive Russian air assault in September 2015 on these same Turkey-backed rebels on the eastern and southern outskirts of Damascus—an intervention many military experts believe saved the Syrian regime from collapse.

There is a similar, more recent Turkish-Russian proxy war going on in Libya. Russia is backing General Khalifa Haftar's assault on Tripoli on behalf of the Tobruk government in the east against the UN-sanctioned government in Tripoli in western Libya, which, according to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, all of whom support Haftar, is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey, along with Qatar, backs the government in Tripoli—so much so that Erdoğan asked for and received permission from his parliament to send Turkish troops to stop Haftar's advance.

There is even a strong technical side to the conflict between Russia and Turkey in Libya. The Russians provided Haftar with bomb-laden drones, which are of critical importance as Haftar's forces increasingly penetrate the dense, built-up areas of Tripoli. The drones help Haftar identify and kill pro-government forces. Ankara responded by providing Turkish drones to the government in Tripoli.

No such proxy war exists on Syrian soil between Iran and Russia. In fact, at the height of the civil war, considerable coordination existed between the two. Russia "brokered" a truce with the rebels around Damascus that allowed them to withdraw to Idlib. Three years later, the Russians are helping Syria, Hezbollah, and other Iranian-backed Shiite militias to finish them off. The rebel withdrawal (including their families) required safe passage through Hezbollah-controlled areas. The withdrawal was conducted by bus and was accompanied by Russian military police. It went off without a hitch.

But cooperation between Moscow and Tehran has given way to considerable bitterness as Russia has effectively given a green light to Israel to destroy Iran's military and industrial build-up in Syria, which is designed to subject Israel to

the threat of an array of precision-guided missiles. Israel claims that it conducted over 200 attacks in Syria against Iran and its proxies in 2018 alone. The major aim is to hit the infrastructure, not kill Iranian personnel, but the latter often happens nevertheless. Moscow's tolerance for these Israeli strikes does not endear it to Tehran.

This divergence reflects their different views on what Syria should be. Russia wants to see a strong Syrian state—basically a restoration of Syria to the *status quo ante*—so Syria can reliably host a Russian military and naval base on the Mediterranean. Iran, by contrast, wants to turn the Syrian state into a “Lebanon” in which, like Hezbollah in the land of the cedars, pro-Iranian Shiite militias are strong and the state is weak.

As for Turkish-Iranian relations, the third side in the triangular relationship, one need only read the invective in the pro-Iranian media outlets of *al-Manar*, the official Hezbollah media site, and *al-Mayadin*. Turkey is vilified—in terms similar to those used about Israel—for its support for Sunni fundamentalists who kill Hezbollah fighters on Syrian territory. Turkey also controls swaths of Iraqi territory inhabited by Sunnis, presumably to protect them from the wrath of Iran-backed Shiite militias.

Murky relations among allies regarding the Middle East are hardly restricted to the Russian-Turkish-Iranian triad.

The US-European alliance, one of the most powerful and resilient since WWII, has always been characterized by tensions over the Middle East, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Under Trump, these tensions reached a new height with the decision by Britain, Germany, and France to create a financial system between the Islamic Republic and Europe to ease the pain of US sanctions.

Nor does the warming of relations between Israel and the Sunni Arab states prevent them from taking the lead in decisions denouncing Israel's purported misdeeds against the Palestinians or condemning states that show any desire to open a representative office in Israel's capital, Jerusalem. But at least there are no proxy wars between them.

However murky and at times violent the relationship between “allies” on both sides of the divide, the lessons are disadvantageous for Iran and promising for Israel.

For Iran, they mean it will be on its own to face the consequences if it decides to act against the US. For Israel, the divisions between Iran and its “allies” can be exploited to keep the country safe in a dangerous neighborhood.

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