Iran’s Uncertain Standing in the Middle East

In 2014, Iran openly stepped up its engagement in Syria and Iraq in response to the rapid rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known by its Arabic acronym ‘Daesh’) and the growing uncertainty of President Bashar al-Assad’s future. The Iranian position was categorical: the Assad regime must not fall and the newly-established Shia dominance in Iraq must be safeguarded. Iran therefore adopted two key regional policy objectives: stabilize Assad and contain and defeat Daesh. It appears that Iran has come very close to achieving its regional objectives, evident in the subsiding imminent threat to Assad and the containment of Daesh. However, it has done so at a risk to its credibility as a champion of Muslim interests.

Iran has pursued its regional ambitions through two distinct and contradictory avenues. On one hand, Iran has bolstered its patronage of sub-state actors in the region, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Shia militia in Iraq, to counter the threat posed by Daesh to its interests. In the process, Iran has significantly acquired the characteristics of a sectarian power as its client sub-state actors are almost exclusively Shia. These measures undermine its appeal to the idea of Muslim unity, while seriously undercutting the guiding principle of Iran’s foreign policy—enshrined in its Constitution—of protecting the interests of all Muslims wherever they are. On the other hand, Iran has sought to build an international coalition in which Russia has played a decisive role in offering a bulwark against anti-Assad forces in Syria.

There is an inherent contradiction between these two strategies. The former subverts international law by infringing on the authority of neighboring states...
to cultivate sub-state actors; the latter insists on the legal principle of non-interference in the affairs of sovereign states to criticize the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other sheikhdoms in the Persian Gulf for their support for anti-Assad forces. This is a Machiavellian approach to regional power. While Iran will protest its commitment to noble ideals of Muslim unity, its behavior points to its primary concern with maintaining regional influence.

This research paper examines Iran’s response to Daesh and the strategic partnerships it has advanced in order to protect its regional position and influence in the Levant. While these partnerships have served Iran in the short run, protecting its corridor of access to Lebanon via friendly states in Iraq and Syria has come at a high price: a shattered ideal of defending the Muslim umma (community). This does not bode well for Iran’s long-term ambitions in the region.

Iran’s New Regional Environment

The Syrian civil war that began in 2011 and the emergence of Daesh in 2014 threatened to dismantle two key portals of Iranian influence in the Middle Eastern region. The Assad regime has been a long-standing ally for Iran. The geographic location of Syria offers Iran access to southern Lebanon, a strategic asset for training and support of the Lebanese Hezbollah. This access is vital for Iran, and the trio has been lionized in Iranian propaganda as the ‘axis of resistance’ against Israel. The notion of resistance against the United States and Israel has provided the ideological cover for Iran’s foreign and regional policies, and has become even more pertinent in the course of the Syrian conflict.

Since the early days of the war, Tehran has relied on Hezbollah’s engagement in the conflict, where its well-trained and dedicated fighters have offered Assad “formidable military power” against opposition groups. It has been rightly observed by analysts that “Hezbollah’s involvement [in the Syrian conflict was] necessary to preserve the ‘axis of resistance’ against Israel.” In 2014, calls for Assad to step down gained increasing momentum within the international community. A flurry of UN resolutions was put to the Security Council, all of which condemed the Syrian authorities for widespread violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. These warning signs were worrying for Iran, since a new Syrian regime would inevitably be less inclined to facilitate Tehran’s reach into the Levant.
Meanwhile, the brutal agenda espoused by Daesh threatened Iraq’s Shia majority population, which had taken control of political power in the post-Saddam era. A Shia-dominated Iraq offers Iran’s Shia theocracy a natural ally. Iraq is also home to two significant Shia sites, Najaf and Karbala, both of which have played a significant role in Iran’s religious history—the founder of the Islamic Republic spent exile time there and wrote his seminal treatise on the model of Velayat Faqih (Jurisprudence of the most learned scholar). Although the political system in Iraq is not fashioned after Iran, there is a natural affinity which brings the two states together.

Following Sunni revolts (of which Daesh itself may be seen as another example) against the Shia sectarian rule in Iraq and the growing assertiveness of Kurdish groups for autonomy, some regional analysts have suggested that Iraq may best be divided into three states: Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish to avoid further sectarian conflicts. This is simply unacceptable for Iran. As Dina Esfandiary and Ariane M. Tabatabai, two experts on Iranian regional policies, point out, “from Tehran’s perspective Iraq’s partition into three smaller states would shift power dynamics in the region and threaten regional stability. Iraq would no longer be a majority Shi’i state with a central government friendly to Iran; this would clearly diminish Iran’s area of influence.”

Moreover, Iran shares a 900-km border with Iraq, generating fears of a Daesh spillover into Iranian territory. In early 2015, the severity of this threat was highlighted by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, who described the threat posed by Daesh as a matter of national security. In reference to Iranian soldiers killed in Syria and Iraq, the Supreme Leader declared, “they went to fight the enemy and if they did not fight, this enemy would be inside the country … if they were not stopped, we would have to fight them in Kermanshah and Hamedan [provinces in western Iran].”

Indeed, to achieve the twin objectives of securing Assad and weakening Daesh, Tehran increased its deployment of the expeditionary branch of its Islamic Revolutionary Guards—the Quds Force—into the battlefields of Iraq and Syria. Iran’s involvement in the war, however, involves a death toll that needs to be justified, especially in the face of internal voices of dissent. Mohsen Milani, professor of political science and foreign policy with deep knowledge of Iranian politics, suggests that moderate voices inside Iran have argued that “Iran had no vital interests in Syria and that backing Assad would place Iran on the wrong side of history, exposing its hypocrisy for supporting every other Arab uprising but Syria’s.” Consequently, the conservative leadership has endeavored to build domestic support for its policies in Iraq and Syria and undermine the moderate camp (which rallies behind President Hassan Rouhani).

This was reflected in the shift on media coverage of the war. Prior to 2014, Iran’s military involvement in Syria and Iraq was shrouded in secrecy, with the
leadership maintaining it was only sending military advisers to assist the Syrian and Iraqi regimes. By the end of 2014, Iranian news agencies and social media outlets began glorifying Iran’s military involvement with heroic profiles of those killed in the conflicts. Several Instagram accounts were created in dedication to Iranian military efforts. The extent of this proliferation is evident in the rising public profile of Qassem Soleimani, Commander of the Quds Force. Since the emergence of Daesh, photos of the Commander on the front line in Syria and Iraq have gained widespread attention. His profile has been elevated to hero status within Iranian society, something that is usually reserved for those killed in battle, later to be proclaimed as martyrs. Several Iranian news agencies attribute Soleimani’s popularity to the widely held Iranian perspective that Soleimani is “saving” Baghdad from Daesh and “reactivating Shiite militias in Iraq to preserve the rule of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during nearly six years of war.” Soleimani has declared that the “collapse of American power in the region” is the inevitable result of Iran’s “spiritual influence” in bolstering resistance against the United States, Israel, and their allies.

As Iran stepped up its involvement in Syria and Iraq, it was forced to deal with the issue of sectarianism, an issue that fundamentally undermines the ideological underpinnings of the Iranian revolution. From its inception, Iran has maintained that its foreign and regional policies are informed by a revolutionary reading of Islam, one that upholds the Muslim umma against Western powers. This narrative has formed the crux of Iran’s foreign policies, with the case of Hamas offering a prime example. The Sunni make-up of Hamas was a prized quality for Iran. It was utilized by the Iranian leadership to exemplify that it was heading a revolutionary front in support of the entire Muslim community against Israel, an agenda shared by both Shia and Sunni. This self-designated role was challenged by the emergence of Daesh and its brutal sectarian agenda. In response to Daesh, Iran was forced to rely on Iraq’s Shia militia groups and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

In order to overcome this predicament, Iranian leaders systematically blame the West for the plague of sectarianism. This line of thinking is consistent with the persistent rhetoric of the regime and its Manichean view of the world: dividing the Muslim umma along sectarian lines is designed to weaken Iran’s appeal. Further, Iran considers “the rise of various Salafi groups ... [as] part of a deliberate conspiracy (headed by the United States) to weaken Iranian influence in the region.” This perspective was put bluntly by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah
Khamenei: “Those international coalitions that claim to be fighting against terrorists are not trustworthy in any way because these destructive forces—particularly America—are the ones that stand behind the scenes of creating and supporting terrorists such as Daesh.” As a result of this conspiratorial narrative, Iran can consider itself a victim of sectarianism rather than a key contributor to it.

This narrative was discussed and delivered at the 29th Islamic Unity Conference held in Tehran in December 2015. The three-day conference, titled “Present Crises of the Muslim World and Ways to End Them,” was attended by Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani, alongside 600 participants from across the Islamic world. Iran’s Islamic Republic News Agency reported that participants expressed “their gratitude to the late Imam Khomeini pioneer of unity and proximity among Muslims and to his successor, Ayatollah Khamenei, who have both been in pursuit of realizing the plan of unity of the Islamic nation.” Furthermore, the conference echoed the Islamic Republic’s ideological narrative in its conclusions, listed below (unusual English expression in original):

- Present violence and terrorism faced by the World of Islam are within pre-planned plots to tarnish the image of Islam and pave the way for intervention of the enemies in the domestic affairs of Muslims.

- The wave of terrorism harassing Muslim countries is in line with Zionist terrorism and American plots whose final objective is to dominate Muslims following their redrawing the World of Islam and carry out the plot ‘managed chaos’ for shaping the so-called New Middle East. Certainly these destructive hands will not be confined to a single country since they intend to carry out their plots in all countries including supporters of terrorism.

- The only way to confront present crises requires resistance, ideological, cultural, economic, military and political views and that does not realize unless through cooperation among Islamic countries based on pervasive resistance.

This narrative, however, does not account for Iran’s role in deepening the sectarian divide in the region. Iran’s sponsorship of Shia militia in Iraq and utilization of the Shia Hezbollah from Lebanon to bolster the Assad regime has only accentuated the sectarian aspect of the conflict. While Iran’s reliance on its existing ties with the Shia militia in Iraq might have been a logical step in the fight against Daesh, the long-term implications of this relationship are damaging for Iran’s claim to champion Muslim unity.

### The Shia Militias

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), formed by Iraqi Shia militias, is a key strategic lever for Iran. The PMF emerged in 2014 against the specter of Daesh. Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, a prominent Shia cleric, issued a fatwa calling
upon all Iraqis regardless of sectarian affiliation to mobilize in defense of the country and its religious shrines—which happened to be predominantly Shia. The PMF offered the umbrella to bring these militias together. Despite the non-sectarian agenda espoused by al-Sistani, the majority of militias in the PMF are Shia, with a scattering of Sunni, Christian, and Yazidi militia. As veteran observer of the Middle East Geneive Abdo points out, “the sectarian nature of the PMF was not the intention of Sistani, but rather as a consequence of Iran’s fierce support.”

Many of the Shia militias are currently under the control of Iran’s Quds Force, such as the Badr Organization, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, and the Hezbollah Battalions. Furthermore, the PMF’s chief commander, Hadi Al Amiri, and his deputy, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, were previously members of the Quds Force. These groups reflect the Islamic Republic’s revolutionary ideology and consider themselves an integral part of the regional axis led by Iran.

Iran was able to gain considerable power and influence within the PMF by relying on its existing Shia apparatus inside Iraq, built since the 1979 Islamic revolution. From that moment, Iranian leaders have sought to project the Islamic revolution onto the Shia population of Iraq. Thus, two Shia resistant movements that emerged under the repressive rule of Saddam Hussein received special support from Tehran: the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Sadrist movement. Both the Badr Organization and the Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, fighting under the PMF today, are splinter groups of these two movements respectively and have both received considerable training and financial assistance from Tehran in the post-Saddam period.

During the 1980s and 1990s, SCIRI was based in Iran where its military wing, the Badr Organization, was trained, equipped, and commanded by the Quds Force. The Badr Organization played an active role against Saddam’s government. It fought for Iran in the Iran–Iraq war and engaged in the 1991 Shia uprising after Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait. According to analyst Ches Thurber, Badr “was intended to be the military vanguard that could provide the missing element of force to the efforts to expand the Islamic revolution to Iraq.” Throughout the post-Saddam period, Tehran has maintained its training and financial support of the Badr Organization.

The Sadrist movement also received considerable funding and support from Iran. The movement is named after Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, who was assassinated by Saddam’s henchmen in 1999, and is led by his son Muqtada al-Sadr, who spent time in Qom studying Shia jurisprudence. Their historical roots in Shia rebellion against Saddam and subsequently against the U.S. domination of Iraq, as well as the well-entrenched patronage of Iran, have made these Shia groups serious players in Iraqi politics.

In more recent times, since Shia mobilization against Daesh, the Iranian connection has become even more salient. The PMF has proven very assertive...
in promoting Iranian-inspired ideology, especially in southern Iraq where the population is largely Shia. In places such as Basra and Najaf, militia groups under the PMF reportedly renamed streets after the founder of the Iranian Islamic Republic: Ayatollah Khomeini. The PMF was successful in liberating several Iraqi cities from the control of Daesh while providing security to Shia civilians and holy sites in the absence of state security.

Although it has significantly contributed to the containment of Daesh, the PMF has also contributed to the Sunni–Shia divide in Iraq. Iraq’s Sunni leadership claimed that the PMF has carried out attacks as well as looting in liberated towns and portrayed PMF militias as murderers, thieves, and sectarian thugs. During operations to retake Iraqi territory from Daesh, including the Sunni majority areas of Fallujah and Qayyarah, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported abuses by the PMF’s Hezbollah Brigades and the Badr Brigades. Joe Stork, the deputy head of the Middle East Department at HRW, reported that “militias that form part of the PMF have repeatedly carried out horrific, sometimes wide-scale abuses, most recently in Fallujah, with no consequences despite the government’s promises to investigate.” In line with these charges, Human Rights Watch has persistently urged the Iraqi government to hold PMF offenders accountable and to refrain from using them in the battle of Mosul.

Despite these reports, Iran’s conservative leadership insists that the PMF participation in the Iraqi conflict is not about sectarianism. This message is the staple of the state-controlled media in Iran. In October 2016, Iranian Fars News Agency reported “the campaign to liberate Mosul has nothing to do with sectarian tensions and regional designs … it may well be that Mosul offers the best opportunities for a global front against terror at a time when some Western governments and intelligence agencies—in cahoots with certain regional states—are still foolishly expending their ever-increasing military and diplomatic resources on ‘moderate’ terrorists to prevent the failure of their regime-change campaign in Syria.”

The battle of Mosul, however, does represent the pinnacle of sectarian tensions ignited by the PMF inside Iraq. For the Iranian regime, the PMF’s participation in the battle for Mosul was a “crucial step” in securing the Shia militias’ future in Iraq. As regional analyst Hassan Dai points out, “the PMF’s contribution could give them a share of victory and provide them with a pretext to justify their activities long after the defeat of ISIS. That would secure Iran’s influence in Iraq that predominantly relies on these militias.”

In the lead-up to the Mosul offensive in October 2016, the question of the PMF’s role gave rise to new tension between the central government in
Baghdad and the Sunni community. In February 2016, the Nineveh Provincial Council, representative of Mosul’s Nineveh governorate, voted on a resolution to ban the PMF from contributing to the battle of Mosul. The grounds of the resolution were articulated by the council’s Chief Deputy who reportedly stated that “the involvement of the powerful Popular Mobilization Units [PMF] in liberating Mosul would exacerbate sectarian tensions and draw locals to IS.” Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi was keenly aware of the negative reputation of the PMF among the Sunni population and appeared reconciliatory to calls to exclude it from the battleground in Mosul. However, he appeared to reverse course on the PMF in April 2016 when he ordered its integration into the state security apparatus.

The formal absorption of the PMF in the state security structure opened the way for the PMFs involvement in the Mosul offensive. The Iraqi Prime Minister signed an order that designated the PMF “an independent military organization and part of the Iraqi armed forces answering to him as commander-in-chief.” In other words, al-Abadi has essentially sanctioned the Iranian-backed militias to operate within Iraq’s security structure while retaining their own leadership structure. In July 2016, Iraq’s National Security Council officially agreed on the PMF’s participation in the Mosul offensive. This was welcomed by the Iranian leadership, a sentiment that was conveyed personally by Iran’s secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, to the Speaker of the Iraqi parliament, Salim al-Jabouri.

Overall, the PMF has played a significant role in degrading Daesh while simultaneously enhancing Iran’s ability to yield greater influence in Iraq. The latter is evident in al-Abadi’s incorporation of the PMF into the battle of Mosul despite pointed protests by Iraq’s Sunni community. These protests, nonetheless, make clear that any gains against Daesh have not overcome the sectarian divide; indeed, they have further deepened it. The Iranian leadership faces the same predicament in Syria. Stabilizing the Assad regime has come through galvanizing a bolder Shia nexus. This does not bode well for the Islamic Republic’s long-term objectives. A divided Iraq (and Syria) severely limits Iran’s ability to project influence over its neighbor(s), and its claims to uphold the interests of the Muslim umma.

Coalition Building

By July 2015, the Syrian military was facing mounting pressure, losing significant parts of territory to Daesh and other rebel opposition groups. The rebel advance to the Mediterranean coast exposed the Alawite regions of the country, Assad’s own power base. This was an existential threat. Further compounding the dire
situation faced by Assad was the debilitated state of the army. Despite the regime’s claim of 130,000 combat-ready troops, its actual figure stood at around 25,000 towards the end of 2015.47

Meanwhile, Hezbollah troops that had entered the conflict to push back rebels were also feeling the strain. Reports suggest that Hezbollah risked the erosion of “its carefully cultivated image as an invincible fighting force,” gained through years of guerrilla warfare with Israel. The Lebanese militia group initially concentrated its military efforts along Syria’s border with Lebanon in 2013 and 2014. However, by mid-2015, Hezbollah had expanded its operations to several areas inside Syria.48 The rebel forces proved resilient and determined, and also heavily backed by regional powers, most notably Turkey and Arab Sheikhdoms in the Persian Gulf. This external patronage offered the pretext for Iran to lobby for an international coalition in defense of Assad, bringing Russia onto the scene.

In September 2015, Iran spearheaded the formation of an anti-Daesh coalition by Iran, Iraq, Russia, and the Syrian government.49 This initiative was later dubbed the ‘4+1 coalition’ to signify the role of Hezbollah as a non-state actor within the alliance. Iran insisted that the coalition’s purpose was to combat terrorism, primarily Daesh, through intelligence and security coordination.50 Iran’s role in orchestrating this coalition was significant. General Qassem Soleimani had visited Moscow to lobby Russia for its entry into the fray in defense of Assad.51 According to regional analysts, Soleimani’s visit was “the first step in planning for a Russian military intervention that reshaped the Syrian war and forged a new Iranian–Russian alliance in support of Assad.”52 According to regional analyst Emil Aslan Souleimanov, General Soleimani “most likely assured the Russian leadership of the Iranians’ determination to provide the pro-Assad coalition with boots on the ground.”53 In response to Assad’s official request for Russian military assistance, Moscow dispatched its air force to Syria.54 Furthermore, a joint intelligence-sharing center (representing Iran, Iraq, Russia and Syria) was set up in Baghdad’s “Green Zone,” previously utilized as the headquarters of the U.S. occupation. The formation of this joint intelligence center was important in coordinating military operations. As early as October 2015, this intelligence was used to guide Iraqi air sorties against Daesh targets in Syria.55

The coalition undoubtedly bolstered the Syrian regime. Russian airstrikes, accompanied by the ground offensive of Iran and its allies, assisted Assad in stabilizing control over parts of Syria, particularly in areas of strategic importance. After four years of fierce fighting between the regime and Sunni opposition groups (such
as the Free Syrian Army and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham/Jabhat al-Nusra), Assad gained the upper hand over Aleppo. There is little doubt that Assad’s success could not have been achieved without Moscow and the Shia allies’ critical support.  

**Competing Coalitions**

This success however, has come at the expense of a deepened sectarian divide based on the reality on the ground. The 4+1 coalition support for Assad’s Alawite (Shia) regime stands in conflict with the U.S.-led anti-Daesh coalition. The latter was comprised primarily of European countries and the Sunni states of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey which supported mostly Sunni rebel groups. Shortly after Russia launched its anti-Daesh campaign, it became clear that ‘combating Daesh’ was not its first priority, but rather a façade to attack opposition groups in order to stabilize Assad’s power. This should have come as no surprise. Prior to Russia’s engagement alongside Assad, analysts had claimed that “the Assad army and the Islamic State had generally ‘avoided’ each other.” Instead, Russian airstrikes appeared to prioritize opposition rebel groups, many of whom were supported by the U.S.-led coalition. The proxy sectarian war was in full swing, acquiring regional proportions with the potential to bring Iran and Saudi Arabia in a direct confrontation.

While the risk of war with Saudi Arabia did not seem to faze the Iranian leadership, they were more concerned with the solidifying view throughout the Middle East among many Muslim commentators that Iran was engaged in a sectarian war to advance Shi’ism. It was important for Iran to recast the battle in terms of fighting terrorism and justify Iran’s involvement as a necessary step to defend regional stability and ultimately all Muslims. To counter the sectarian narrative, Tehran declared anti-Assad forces to be terrorists and tools of the West to undermine the ‘axis of resistance.’

For instance, in mid-2016, Iran’s conservative newspaper Kayhan proclaimed: “Since the anti-terror campaign by the alliance of Iran, Syria, Iraq, Russia and Hezbollah has been a success in recent months, Moscow and Tehran have decided to intensify the war in order to flush out the remaining foreign-backed terrorists from territories they still hold.” In turn, Ali Akbar Velayati, a top adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, claimed that “we do not hide that we are in consultation with Russia, Syria, and Iraq to prevent the realization of the illegitimate demands of foreigners who seek to topple the legitimate Syrian government.” Velayati’s remarks were echoed by Assad during an interview conducted by the Iranian Khabar TV channel. Assad declared, “when these countries unite against terrorism and fight it militarily and in the areas of security and information … this coalition will, no doubt, achieve real results on the ground, particularly that it enjoys international support from countries which do not have a direct role in these crises and in this region. This is with the exception
of the West, which has always sought to support terrorism, colonization, and stood against peoples’ causes, most countries of the world feel the real danger of terrorism. There have been recently successive statements from countries which support this coalition. That is why I believe that this coalition has great chances of success.61

This narrative, with notions of resistance against Western oppression, has provided the Iranian leaders with the grounds to justify and sustain their efforts inside Syria, hoping rather wishfully that it undermines the perspective of the conflict as a sectarian conflict.

Russia’s Impact

Russia’s engagement in the Syrian crisis has been of critical importance to Tehran’s regional objectives of sustaining Assad’s regime and casting the overall fight in a narrative of resistance against Western interference. Although no formal alliance has been forged between the two states, a strategic partnership has clearly emerged, one that is based upon overlapping visions of the global order and mutual antipathy towards the West. According to distinguished scholar of foreign policy Walter Russel Mead, “Iran and Russia never bought into the geopolitical settlement that followed the Cold War and have thus made increasing efforts to overturn it.”62 Russia’s policy on Syria is thus driven largely by post-Cold-War power dynamics and a resentment of U.S. hegemony. In a similar way to Iran, Russia sees in the Assad regime its last standing political and military partner in the region, offering Moscow direct access to the Mediterranean Sea via its naval base in Tartus.63 Furthermore, Moscow has been anxious about the risk of Islamic extremism spreading into Russian territory. Assad’s fall could serve as a beacon for other Islamic groups in the vast Russian Federation, which has already had a history of fighting terrorism.64

Russia’s opposition to regime change in Syria is justified in terms of the principles of non-intervention in the sovereign affairs of other states and of protection of their territorial integrity, both useful legal tools to ward off U.S. policy in the region.65 Moscow sees U.S.-led interventions in the post-Cold War environment, such as Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, as indicative of Washington’s desire for global hegemony.66 Consequently, Moscow perceives Washington’s support for Syrian rebel opposition groups as blatantly challenging the foundations of the legitimate Syrian regime.67 Moscow rejects that Washington’s true intentions in Syria are driven by humanitarian concerns. Rather, Moscow perceives this to be a pretext for the United States to remove a government hostile to U.S. interests.68
This outlook evidently runs in line with the Iranian narrative of resistance against an encroaching United States. Amid high-level talks between Moscow and Tehran in 2015, Khamenei reinforced Moscow’s position: “The Americans are seeking to first dominate Syria and then spread their control over the region in a bid to fill their historical gap of lack of domination and control over West Asia, and this long-term plot is a threat to all nations and states, Russia and Iran in particular.”

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia has utilized its veto several times to prevent passing resolutions aimed at imposing sanctions on the Syrian government. As Samuel Charap, an expert in Russian politics, points out, the fact that the proposed resolutions did not directly propose regime change was irrelevant given Moscow’s interpretation of Washington’s objectives. In response to Western criticism of Russia’s veto, Vitaly Churkin, Russia’s ambassador to the UN, responded: "stop supporting all the villains across the world, including terrorists … stop interfering in the internal affairs of sovereign states. Stop your colonial habits. Leave the world in peace and then, maybe, things will improve in many areas and regions of the world.”

Russian–Iranian relations peaked in August 2016, when Russia used the Iranian Hamedan air base to launch attacks against opposition forces inside Syria. This joint coordination was significant in the signals it sent. For the first time, Russia had used a country other than Syria to launch its airstrikes against the opposition. For Iran, it marked the first time the Islamic Republic had allowed a foreign power to use its airbase since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Russia’s use of the base caused tension in Iran. With reference to the constitution, an Iranian parliamentarian stated that the establishment of any type of foreign military base, regardless of its purpose, is forbidden.

The Iranian leadership was quick to appease these concerns. Secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, responded: “Iran has allied with Russia given its need to cooperate a resistance front to confront the takfiri (apostates’) plots and it is using Russia’s capabilities in air operations alongside the ground operations whose planners and military advisors are from Iran and it is a sign of might and not dependence.” In a country where religion plays such a sensitive role, the Iranian leadership’s willingness to risk the legitimacy of its own religious establishment through its relationship with Russia exposes the gravity of its desire to stabilize Assad’s power.
Iran and Russia’s unwavering efforts to sustain Assad’s grip on power have led to a shift in the international community’s position on Assad. Throughout the entire duration of the war, the United States and its allies have demanded that Assad surrender power, while opposing an Iranian presence at the negotiating table. In October 2015, one month after Russia launched its airstrike campaign backed by Iranian efforts on the ground, Tehran for the first time was invited to attend peace negotiations. This was based on the international community’s desire to test the flexibility of the Iranian position on Assad. Conversely, Iranian Foreign Minister, Zarif Mohammad Javad, claimed: “Those who tried to resolve the Syrian crisis have come to the conclusion that without Iran being present, there is no way to reach a reasonable solution to the crisis.”

Iran has been clearly emboldened by Russia’s involvement and the faltering commitment in Western capitals for Assad to go. In September 2016, the Syrian opposition—backed by Britain, Saudi Arabia, and allies—drafted a comprehensive plan to end the Syrian conflict. This was a victory for Iran and its allies as the proposal did not require President Bashar al-Assad to step down in the interim period prior to holding elections and the formation of a new government. This has relegated the prospect of regime change into the future, and thus ultimately serves the interests of Iran’s Syrian policy objective. The subsequent ceasefire treaty negotiated by Russia and Turkey in December 2016 further highlighted Russia’s growing clout in managing the conflict, serving Iranian interests.

Iran was keen to recruit Russia in its efforts to bolster Assad and prevent regime change. This tactic appears to have paid off and the Assad regime seems to have come back from the verge of collapse. The Russian involvement, however, presents a potentially new challenge to Iran as it renders Iran the junior partner and reliant on Russian continued interest in Syria. While it is unlikely that Russia would change course dramatically, it needs to be acknowledged that Russia’s interest in Syria is only one part of Russia’s global interests. This introduces a risk which could prove detrimental to Iran’s agenda.

Conclusion

The threat posed by Daesh to Iran’s allies in the region was taken very seriously in Tehran. Daesh was challenging the viability of Iraq and Syria as two friendly states to Iran, thus seriously undermining Iran’s ability to maintain its geostrategic influence in the Levant. Daesh threatened Iran’s corridor to Lebanon, where Iran has invested heavily in Hezbollah, and its ability to humiliate the overtly superior Israeli armed forces. This affiliation had served Iran’s ideological worldview well and been cherished as the ‘axis of resistance’ against Israeli–American imperialism. Iran’s response to the Daesh threat, which some in the leadership presented as
existential, was twofold: rely on Tehran’s links with sub-state actors in the region to mount a credible defense against Daesh as well as other rebel groups, and lobby for an international response based on protecting the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states.

Iran proved successful in making significant advances on both fronts. Links with Iraq’s Shia-based Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) paid off as the PMF grew to be a formidable fighting force—now active in pushing Daesh out of Mosul, five years after the ill-prepared Iraqi national army gave up the city. In Syria, Iran encouraged Hezbollah to put up an effective defense for the Assad regime. The cultivation of sub-state groups and militia fighters has been a signature plank of Iran’s foreign policy in the neighborhood, designed to offset the firepower imbalance between Iran and its potential adversaries (i.e., Israel and the United States). Iran’s position in relation to the future of Syria received a significant boost with Russia’s military intervention on behalf of President Assad. Moscow’s entry into the fray made Iran’s appeals to international law and the narrative of fighting a Western conspiracy seem more credible. The growing concern in the West regarding the threat of terrorism emanating from Daesh also served to shift the emphasis away from Assad.

Iran’s double-edged strategy may appear contradictory. At one level, Tehran expands its network of patronage to sub-state actors in the region and at another level appeals to international law to lobby Russia into action. But there is no real contradiction if these measures are to serve a common purpose, and that is Iran’s regional status and its asymmetrical advantage in the Levant—most evident in terms of Hezbollah. The patronage of militia groups and upholding state sovereignty and international law are mere instruments in protecting Iran’s regional power and influence. The ultimate objective of maintaining its regional standing and fending off emerging threats, which some in the leadership view as existential, justifies the use of all options—even if they seem contradictory. In that sense, Iran is behaving rationally, leveraging alternative tools to maximize its geostrategic position. This appears to have paid dividends in the short run.

With improving prospects of Assad’s survival, Iran appears to be on the road to recovery from a serious threat to its regional ambitions. But the long-term view is less promising. Not because of the potential inconsistency with international law, but rather Iran’s intense reliance on Shia fighters in Iraq and Syria has served to substantiate accusations of sectarianism, aired most forcefully by Saudi Arabia. An alliance with Russia, a non-Muslim power, is unlikely to exonerate Iran in the eyes of many, including within the Islamic Republic. The image of a Shia power, as opposed to an Islamic power, is anathema to Iran’s regional projection. This will undoubtedly undermine Iran’s ability to appeal to Muslim masses in the region and its claim to represent all Muslims against Western imperialism. The
implications of Iran’s short-term gains against Daesh could be very damaging for Iran’s regional standing in the long run.

Notes


15. Byman, “Sectarianism afflicts the new Middle East,” p. 89.
17. Byman, “Sectarianism afflicts the new Middle East,” p. 89.
30. Thurber, “Militias as socio-political movements: Lessons from Iraq’s armed Shia groups.”
36. Ibid.
38. Dai, “Is this the beginning of ‘Hezbollah-ization’ of Iraq?”


52. Bassam and Perry, “How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow.”
57. Instead, the Islamic State engaged in fighting other anti-Assad groups, including various factions of the FSA-affiliated secular and moderate rebels and the al-Nusra Front. For more information see: Souleimanov, “Mission Accomplished? Russia’s Withdrawal from Syria.”
