

**MOSCOW-ANKARA-TEHRAN:
A TRIPARTITE TACTICAL ALLIANCE
IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37178/ca-c.20.1.01>

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, the Syrian civil war, which began as an internal political crisis, developed into an international crisis with all influential world actors involved to different degrees, or even a war of a new type, endowed with the elements of a proxy war, a hybrid war, an irregular war, and an asymmetric war.

The Syrian crisis changed the balance of power in the Middle East; it strongly affected foreign policy strategies of regional and extra-regional players and created new coalitions and alliances that fight terrorism and transnational security threats.

Russia could not stay away from the Syrian settlement: its involvement suited its national interests and the resolution to play a much greater role on the international arena; it was implied by potential threats, the spread of terrorism and extremism, and the changed balance of power in the Middle

East. Having discovered that efficient cooperation with the United States was impossible, Russia set up an operational task group that comprised Russia, Turkey, and Iran, a tripartite alliance of sorts.

The paper examines how the mechanism of interaction between Russia, Turkey, and Iran took shape in the context of crisis resolution in Syria; the authors conclude that this is a tactical union rather than a strategic military alliance. These countries combined forces to prevent Syrian disintegration and its geopolitical weakening, as well as to consolidate their positions in the region. Despite serious disagreements, the allies have achieved compromises on many issues. Russia, Turkey, and Iran have already resolved many ad hoc problems and have positively affected the course of Syrian settlement, bringing peace closer at the negotiation table.

KEYWORDS: Syrian crisis, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Syria, proxy wars, hybrid wars, irregular wars, asymmetric wars, ISIS.

Introduction

The Syrian crisis, one of the most complicated and protracted international crises of the recent times, began as an internal conflict unrelated to other crises in the same region. It has spread far beyond the country's borders and changed the geopolitical architecture of the Middle East to become one of the most real threats to international transborder security due to the activities of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS),¹ the continuation of the civil war in Iraq, and the involvement of the extraregional actors.

It became a watershed of sorts for Russia's foreign policy in the region and in the world. The resolution of the Syrian crisis by means of a military operation and negotiations led Russia to elaborating new approach to the realization of its national interests.

In the years that followed the Soviet Union's disintegration, Russia has lost its former influence in the Middle East along with a clear understanding of the regional agenda and of the development of the international relations system as a whole. As it was reviving its economy and rebuilding its political influence, Moscow was gradually clarifying the nature of its national interests in the region and the ways and means of their realization. The events in the Middle East and North Africa that

¹ Terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation.

began unfolding in 2011 tipped the balance of regional power. Regional threats around the Syrian crisis were piling up, forcing Russia to formulate new approaches to the Middle East, while analysts and researchers had to look for new dimensions of the regional context and new theoretical explanations of the settlement of the Syrian crisis/conflict.²

To a great extent, Russia's involvement in the Syrian crisis and consolidation of Russia's positions in the Middle East forced Moscow, for the first time in the post-Soviet period, to build up a coalition of regional leaders (Moscow-Ankara-Tehran), which is one of the weightiest factors of Syrian settlement today.

How Russia Became Involved in Syrian Settlement

As one of the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, Russia, which sought much stronger positions as one of the influential centers of the contemporary world, could not remain indifferent to the Syrian conflict and its settlement. Its specifics, namely, the use of force, demanded Russia's armed interference as the only adequate method of helping the Syrian state in its struggle with the armed opposition and terrorist groups. Military victory was an indispensable condition of political settlement.

The so-called Islamic State is a more or less recent phenomenon. Since 2006, this terrorist group has been fighting in Iraq. In 2014, this alliance/group declared an Islamic Caliphate and launched active military actions in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, where internal conflicts and civil wars left parts of their territories uncontrolled.

This transformation of a terrorist group into a quasi-state challenged the United States, which still considers 9/11 as a national tragedy. Washington initiated the first anti-ISIS coalition.³ At different stages it united up to forty countries, yet the composition and functions of its members were never specified and no documents were signed.

Its core, however, is well known: the United States and NATO countries (Belgium, Denmark, Canada, France, and The Netherlands). However, it is the U.S. that is primarily responsible for the most air strikes.

Albania, Israel, Hungary, South Korea, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Sweden, and Japan were involved in intelligence and technical and material assistance. Members of the League of Arab States—Bahrain, Qatar, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—were also involved. After several months of fighting, the coalition members started doubting the efficiency of air strikes alone. In the absence of a comprehensive approach to the problem of terrorism acute disagreements started cropping up.

In the fall of 2015, Russia set up an anti-ISIS coalition of its own. In 2015, speaking at the 70th session of the U.N. General Assembly, President Putin stated that the world needed a wide anti-terrorist coalition to fight ISIS in Syria and Iraq.⁴ Moscow was convinced that the coalition should be approved by a resolution of the U.N. SC and the official Syrian and Iranian leaders.

² See: V.M. Akhmedov, *Siriyskoe vosstanie: istoria, politika, ideologia*, ed. by A.M. Khazanov, Institute of Oriental Studies, Moscow, 2018; D. Trenin, "Portret Siriyskoy voyny," *Rossia v globalnoy politike*, available at [<https://globalaffairs.ru/book/Portret-siriiskoi-voiny-18818>]; Iu.Iu. Skuratova, "Pozitsia Rossii v siriyskom krizese," *Vestnik Moscovskogo universiteta*, Series 21, Upravlenie (gosudarstvo i obshchestvo), No. 1, 2017, pp. 138-150; E. Stepanova, "Russia's Policy on Syria after the Start of Military Engagement," *Russia in Global Affairs*, available at [<https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/PONARS-Eurasia/Russias-Policy-on-Syria-after-the-Start-of-Military-Engagement-18065>], 28 march, 2016.

³ See: V.I. Batyuk, "SShA protiv IGIL," *SShA i Kanada: ekonomika, politika, kultura*, No. 6, 2016, pp. 3-19.

⁴ See: "Siriyskaia partiia: kak na initsiativy Putina v OON otreagirol Zapad," available at [<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/29/09/2015/560a97849a7947d6af019635>], 20 June, 2019.

Russia discussed the problem at the preliminary meetings with the foreign ministers of the United States, Iran, Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. It contributed to the information center of the struggle against ISIS set up in Bagdad in order to collect, keep, process and analyze relevant operational information. The coalition or, rather, the tactical anti-ISIS group, attracted Turkey and Iran; other countries did not dare to openly oppose the United States.

Moscow invited Washington to join forces in anti-ISIS struggle and form a united front together with the Syrian army, Turkey and Iran. The American administration declined the offer: it disagreed with Russia on the nature of Assad's regime, of the armed Syrian opposition and of certain terrorist groups. Moscow, in its turn, declined an invitation to join the anti-terrorist coalition led by the United States because it was operating without a mandate of the U.N. SC and the permission of the legal Syrian government.

Since the first day of the Syrian crisis, Russia supported the elected president of Syria and its government; from the very first day of the armed struggle it helped official Damascus with armaments, military hardware, and ammunition, trained specialists and military advisors.

On 30 September, 2015, in response to the request of the President of the Syrian Arab Republic Bashar Assad to help his country in its struggle against international terrorism, Russia entered the war on the side of the government forces.

This was Russia's first military operation outside the post-Soviet space; it had no experience of this sort, yet its involvement in the armed conflict in Syria radically changed the nature and the course of the war.

Russia and Turkey in the Context of the Syrian Crisis

Throughout the 2000s, the economic and political relations between Russia and Turkey were very dynamic. Russia's military operation in Syria and its support of President Assad, on the other hand, caused a lot of disagreements between Moscow and Ankara. Up until the fall of 2015, or until 24 November, 2015 to be more exact, when the Turkish armed forces shot down a Russian fighter that allegedly violated Turkey's air space at the Turkish-Syrian border, the sides had remained determined to preserve and develop their political and economic ties.

After the incident, Russia continued building up its military presence in Syria; it closed the Syrian airspace for Turkish aircrafts with the help of air defense S-400 system stationed at the Khmeimim airbase. Moscow gradually improved its political and military relationships with the Syrian Kurds, with the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, People's Protection Units (YPG), which Ankara saw as a branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Russia pushed Turkey away from the Syrian peace process, accused Ankara of supporting ISIS and other terrorist groups fighting in Syria and launched a wide-scale anti-Turkey propaganda campaign.

Political and economic relations between Russia and Turkey remained frozen for nearly seven months. Turkey continued fighting ISIS and PKK. In February 2016, an offensive of Syrian Kurds in the north that brought them dangerously close to the Syrian-Turkish border changed the military balance in their favor, while Turkey and Saudi Arabia began considering a land operation in Syria.⁵

Turkey's position on Syrian Kurds caused a crisis in the relations between Turkey and the United States. On 9 February, 2016, State Department spokesman John Kirby pointed out that the

⁵ See: "SMI: Saudovskaia Aravia i Turtsia rassmatrivaiut variant vvoda voysk v Siriiu," available at [<https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/2681727>], 20 February, 2016.

U.S. Administration did not regard PYD a terrorist organization.⁶ Irritated, the president of Turkey suggested that Washington should choose between continued relations with Turkey and the Kurdish “terrorists” in Syria.

The Turks were especially concerned about an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria’s north, a possibility that was growing increasingly real. Ankara was worried by the cooperation between the U.S. and the Syrian Kurds; it was even more concerned about the fact that the Kurds came too close to the unification of the Kurdish cantons in the north of Syria—the districts of Afrin, Jezire and Kobani—that in any case were developing relatively independently as soon as they had declared themselves autonomous.⁷

This forced Ankara to seek a normalization of relations with Moscow. The process began in June 2016 with President Erdoğan’s letter to Putin and continued at the personal meeting of the two presidents in St. Petersburg on 9 August, 2016.⁸ The sides set up a three-tier high-level consultation mechanism between the foreign ministries, special services and general staffs.

Iran’s involvement in the process made the regional dialog between Turkey and Russia on Syria much more significant.

On the eve of his meeting with the Turkish president in St. Petersburg, Putin met with President Rouhani in Baku. On 12 August Foreign Minister of Iran Zarif visited Ankara. A week later, the Turkish foreign minister came to Tehran with an official visit. The fact that Moscow and Tehran had supported the Turkish government during the failed coup d’état (the U.S. and the EU offered no comments) helped normalize trilateral relations and brought the three countries closer together.

Operation Euphrates Shield launched by Turkey on 24 August, 2016 together with the Free Syrian Army against ISIS and Kurdish military units was the most important product of the above collaboration.

Generally displeased with the Turkish military operation (mainly because it had not been coordinated with President Assad or the U.N. SC) many Russian political leaders, including President Putin, admitted that the shifting situation in Syria threatened Turkish security. Moscow recommended Ankara to coordinate its operations with Assad and considered the Syrian government the only legitimate source of power in the country.

Since the very beginning, that is, since the fall of 2011, when the Turkish government demonstrated its active support of the Syrian opposition, Moscow and Ankara could not agree on Assad’s future. For a long time, Turkey was one of the loudest critics of Assad’s regime on different international platforms and insisted that as long as he remained in power, the Syrian problem would defy solution. The fight against PKK readjusted many of the Turkish priorities in Syria.

Ankara decided to set up the Moscow-Ankara-Tehran axis mainly because these countries remained devoted to the idea of Syrian territorial integrity. The fact that previously Russia had maintained regular contacts with the Kurdish leaders, invited them to take part in the negotiations with other Syrian forces and even opened a mission of Syrian Kurds in Moscow in April 2015 was balanced out by Russia’s statements that the Kurds were an inalienable part of Syrian society, the fact that it invited them to discuss conflict settlement and never favored a separate Kurdish territory.

In turn, Russia skillfully used the deteriorating relations between Turkey and the United States to influence Ankara’s position on Assad’s regime. The Syrian president, likewise, was concerned about Kurdish territorial acquisitions in the north of Syria and the clashes between the government forces and the Kurdish armed detachments in Al-Hasakah in August 2016.

⁶ See: “Istoria siriyskikh kurdiv. Dosie,” available at [<https://tass.ru/info/2685549>], 20 February, 2016.

⁷ See: “Kurdskiy kanton na severe Sirii prinimaet novye zakony,” available at [<https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/world/20160120/1696045>]; “Istoria siriyskikh kurdiv. Dosie,” available at [<https://tass.ru/info/2685549>], 20 February, 2016.

⁸ See: “Vladimirom Putinyim polucheno poslanie Prezidenta Turtsii Recepta Tayyipa Erdoğana,” available at [<http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52282>], 27 June, 2016.

The fact that Ankara indirectly, through Russia, warned Assad about Operation Euphrates Shield and that Prime Minister of Turkey Akbulut Yıldırım hinted that Turkey may accept Assad as one of the official figures during the transition period signified that the Kurdish threat was a much more serious challenge than Assad's involvement in the political future of his country.

Having pooled forces, Turkey, Russia, and Iran arrived fairly promptly at significant results on Syrian settlement: Ankara prevented the unification of three Kurdish districts and forced ISIS away from the north of Syria.

Operation Euphrates Shield allowed Turkey to divide the Kurdish enclave and prevent a Kurdish autonomy at the Syrian border. By the spring of 2017, Turkish armed forces pushed ISIS out of the border area between the cities of Azaz and Jarabulus to set up a buffer zone controlled by Ankara. The final goal was thus achieved.

The Turkish-Russian dialog was very important for settling the humanitarian crisis in Aleppo; thousands of civilians were evacuated, to a great extent due to the fact that Turkey had persuaded Moscow to help organize the departure of rebel units from Aleppo. Foreign Minister of Russia Sergey Lavrov summed up the talks as much more valuable than the months-long negotiations with Washington,⁹ which he dismissed as "fruitless sitting around."

Moscow and Ankara did a lot to launch the negotiations on Syria in Astana. On 14 December, 2016, in a telephone conversation, the Russian and Turkish presidents agreed to offer the sides of the conflict (Russia, to the government of Syria and Turkey, to the armed Syrian opposition) to double up the peace talks in Geneva with peace talks in Astana (currently Nur Sultan). The then President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev supported the initiative and agreed to offer the capital of Kazakhstan as the negotiations venue of the talks.¹⁰

On 20 December, 2016, foreign ministers of Turkey, Russia, and Iran issued the Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of Iran, Russia and Turkey on the agreed steps to revitalize the political process aimed at ending the Syrian conflict, the so-called Moscow Declaration. The document demonstrated that the sides had achieved a consensus on ceasefire and a peaceful agreement on Syria. The sides insisted on Syria's territorial integrity and pointed out that "Iran, Russia and Turkey reiterate their determination to fight jointly against ISIL/DAESH and Al-Nusra and to separate from them armed opposition groups," and for the first time expressed "their readiness to facilitate and become the guarantors of the prospective agreement being negotiated between the Syrian Government and the opposition."¹¹

Foreign Minister of Russia Lavrov said at a joint press conference with the foreign ministers of Turkey Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Iran Mohammad Javad Zarif that "the most efficient and effective format for solving the Syrian crisis is our current trilateral format."¹²

The Moscow process was very important: for the first time Turkey, Russia, and Iran closed ranks on the same platform to seek a way out of the Syrian crisis. Previously, Russia had organized talks between the Syrian government and the opposition (also known as the Moscow talks) with no avail,

⁹ "Lavrov nazval 'besplodnymi posidelkami' peregovory s SShA po Sirii," available at [<https://ria.ru/20161214/1483558170.html>], 20 December, 2016.

¹⁰ See: "Telephone Conversations between the Presidents of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin and Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan," available in Russian at [http://www.akorda.kz/ru/events/international_community/phone_calls/telefonnyerazgovory-s-prezidentami-rossiiskoi-federacii-vladimiro-putinym-i-turcii-redzhepom-taiipom-erdoganom], 10 January, 2018.

¹¹ *Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of Iran, Russia and Turkey on agreed steps to revitalize the political process to end the Syrian conflict, Moscow*, available at [<https://www.voltairenet.org/article194669.html>], 20 December, 2016.

¹² Speech and answers to questions of the media of Foreign Minister of Russia S.V. Lavrov in the course of the joint press-conference on the results of tripartite talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran M.J. Zarif and Foreign Minister of Turkey M. Çavuşoğlu, Moscow, available in Russian at [http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/2574870], 20 December, 2016.

since the majority of the Syrian opposition refused to be involved in the process. Turkey's involvement persuaded the opposition leaders to sit down at the negotiation table with representatives of official Damascus. It should be said that the United States that had been present practically in all preceding formats as an important participant was to a great extent excluded from the Moscow process.

Some people in Turkey interpreted the Moscow Declaration as their country's retreat in the face of Russia and Iran mainly because by signing it Turkey moved away from its earlier determination to remove Assad from power. The Turkish opposition was very much dissatisfied with the fact that the Democratic Union Party and the People's Protection Units were not outlawed as terrorist organizations.

Ankara retreated on these two issues to achieve a mutual understanding with Moscow and Tehran on a comprehensive ceasefire.

Iran's position was very specific. In order to have a say in the bilateral Russia-Turkey format and not to be elbowed out of the agreement, Iran used Shi'a volunteers to block the evacuation of the peaceful Shi'a population from the villages of Fua and Kefraya, located near Idlib, and from Aleppo, the areas which were attacked by insurgent units supported by the Turks, until Turkey agreed on a separate deal with Iran.

Iran and other actors present in Syria were aware of the conflict of interests between Ankara and Moscow that may negatively affect the two countries' regional cooperation.

The Turks negatively responded to the siege of Eastern Aleppo by the armed forces of Russia and the army of Bashar Assad.

On 13 December, 2016, hundreds of people came to the Russian consulate in Istanbul to protest against Russian policy in Syria. Several days later, Russian Ambassador to Turkey Andrei Karlov was assassinated in Ankara at an art exhibition by a Turkish policeman who shouted: "Don't forget Aleppo, don't forget Syria."¹³

This, however, did not spoil the relations between the two countries; both governments in unison condemned what had happened as "a provocative terrorist attack" designed to derail the relations between the two countries. The Moscow Declaration was signed a day after the assassination, the fact that speaks volumes.

The "Moscow process" can be assessed as an indubitable sign of a real and considerable shift in the official position of Turkey, which had had very different ideas about Assad's political future in the past. It seems that the murder of the Russian ambassador consolidated Moscow's position in its relations with Ankara. Immediately after the meeting with his Turkish and Iranian colleagues, Lavrov stated to the journalists that Russia was fighting terrorists, rather than trying to remove Assad.¹⁴ However, this shift in the position of Turkey might have been a tactical move of Ankara, which did not completely abandon this goal. Late in November, President Erdoğan claimed that Turkey had interfered in the Syrian crisis "to put an end to the despotic rule of Assad."¹⁵

This statement followed the death of four Turkish soldiers under the bombs allegedly dropped by Assad's forces. When Moscow rejected these accusations despite the convincing evidence supplied by Turkey and asked Erdoğan for clarifications, Ankara softened its position and hastened to assure the Kremlin that Operation Euphrates Shield had been launched to fight terrorists, not to remove the regime of Bashar Assad. This incident, however, can be assessed as another confirmation of the fact that Turkish-Russian cooperation in Syria has its limits, and that Assad is not alien to using the disagreements between Ankara and Moscow in his interests.

¹³ "Ubiystvo rossiyskogo posla v Turcii i ego vozmozhnye posledstvia," available at [<https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-38373690>], 19 December 2016.

¹⁴ See: Speech and answers to questions of the media by Foreign Minister of Russia S.V. Lavrov...

¹⁵ *Hürriyet Daily News*, available at [<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeyentered-syria-to-end-al-assads-rule-presidenterdogan.aspx?pageID=238&nid=106709>], 29 November, 2016.

On the whole, political scientists and experts agree that the Moscow declaration opened a new stage of political settlement in Syria. Some of them went even further, claiming that it was the starting point of pushing Washington to the margins of the Syrian conflict. Having taken the initiative into their hands, Ankara, Moscow, and Tehran are attempting to exclude the United States from the new peace process. Still others, David Barchard among them, say: “So what we are seeing in Syria seems like a drift towards the emergence of two zones of influence: A Russian-backed littoral state under Assad, claiming to be the sole government of the country, and a ‘Free Syria’ backed by Turkey.”¹⁶

Tripartite summits on the Syrian crisis became another important step towards the Moscow-Is-tanbul-Tehran axis. The first was held in Sochi on 22 November, 2017 and was predated by several important events. On 1 November, President Putin paid an official visit to the Islamic Republic of Iran, during which President Rouhani pointed out: “Our countries (Russia and Iran.—*Authors.*) play an important role in peace and stability in the region, our cooperation made the routing of ISIS possible.”

On 13 November, Putin and Erdoğan met in Sochi; a week later Putin received the president of Syria. President Putin spoke to the American president and leaders of Middle Eastern countries, most importantly, King Salman ben Abdel Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia. Foreign ministers and chiefs of the general staffs of Russia, Turkey, and Iran also met to discuss the problems within their competences.

On 22 November, heads of Russia, Turkey, and Iran met in Sochi for a meeting attended by foreign and defense ministers of the three countries. The meeting lasted three hours, during which President Putin pointed to the importance of their concerted efforts to prevent the disintegration of Syria, its occupation by terrorists and a humanitarian catastrophe. The Russian president said that a decisive blow had been delivered to Syrian fighters, making it possible to end the protracted civil war and expressed his special gratitude to the president of Turkey and president of Iran for the valuable contribution to the Astana process.

In their joint statement the sides “reaffirmed their determination to continue their active cooperation on Syria for the achievement of a lasting ceasefire between the conflicting parties and the advancement of the political process envisaged by the U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254”; they fully supported an inter-Syrian dialog between all social and political groups.

The presidents pointed out that “the Astana format had been the only effective international initiative that had helped reduce violence across Syria and had contributed to peace and stability in Syria; that the de-escalation zone lowered the level of tension and violence”; it laid the foundation that allowed to address humanitarian problems and created the “conditions for the safe return of refugees and internally displaced persons.”

The leaders of Russia, Iran and Turkey called on “the representatives of the Syrian Arab Republic and the opposition groups that are committed to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of Syria, to have constructive attendance at the Syrian National Dialogue Congress to be held in Sochi in the near future” initiated for the sake of Syria’s sovereignty, independence, unity, territorial integrity and non-factional nature.¹⁷

On 3-4 April, 2018, Putin paid a two-day working visit to Ankara on an invitation of President Erdoğan.

At a press conference held after the first day of the visit Erdoğan said that he had informed President Putin that Operation Olive Branch in Afrin had been carried out to ensure Turkey’s security and territorial integrity and national unity of Syria.¹⁸

¹⁶ D. Barchard, “How Putin and Erdoğan Divided Up Syria,” *Middle East Eye*, available at [<http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/turkey-russia-syria-putin-erdogan-usfrenemies-1670199042>] 24 October, 2016.

¹⁷ See: *Statement by the Presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey*, available at [<http://www.president.ir/en/101671>].

¹⁸ See: *Joint press conference of Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan*, available in Russian at [<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57192>], 3 April, 2018.

Putin began the second day of his working visit by meeting with President of Iran Hassan Rouhani and discussing bilateral cooperation and international and regional agenda.¹⁹

The working visit was concluded by a trilateral summit of state leaders that guaranteed the Astana process on Syrian settlement; the sides issued a Joint Statement and gave a joint press conference.²⁰

The third trilateral meeting of the heads of guarantor states took place in Tehran, the capital of the Islamic Republic of Iran, on 7 September, 2018, and focused on “issues related to a set of additional measures to finally eradicate the stronghold of international terrorism, promote the political settlement process and solve humanitarian issues.”²¹

The president of Iran accompanied his statements on Syria with his usual comments on the negative role of the United States and Israel in the Syrian crisis²² and insisted that foreign interference in the Middle East under the false pretext of democratization should be resolutely opposed.²³

The fourth tripartite meeting took place in Sochi on 14 February, 2019: the sides met to discuss a long-term settlement of the conflict in Syria.²⁴

The presidents discussed “a special committee that would be tasked with drafting Syria’s next constitution” including the list of its members and the procedure based on the results of work of the three countries; the demilitarized buffer zone in the Syrian city of Idlib,” the developments in the northeast of Syria in view of the fact that “Washington in December announced the withdrawal of 2,000 U.S. troops from Syria”; humanitarian aid to Syria.²⁵

To sum up: the relations between Moscow and Ankara in the context of the Syrian crisis were gradually changing to arrive at the stage of mutual usefulness. The position of the United States on the Syrian issue and the Kurdish question figured prominently in the bilateral agenda and in the Moscow-Ankara-Tehran axis discussions. Turkey is tied to the United States by NATO membership, yet in Syria the national interests of these two NATO members are different. Turkey tries on the role of the regional leader, demonstrating greater independence with the help of its efficient interaction with Russia and Iran. Russia, in its turn, can directly affect the decisions of the Turkish leaders related to the Syrian crisis.

Russia and Iran in the Context of the Syrian Crisis

Iran has moved to one of the central places in Russia’s Syrian policy. The Kremlin is more or less convinced that many of the external players are not concerned about the interests of common people in Syria: they want to deprive Tehran of its main ally in the Arab world. It is no secret that after the Islamic revolution of 1979, Iran has been chasing regional leadership; it wants to create a “Shi’a Crescent” in which Syria will occupy one of the most important places.

¹⁹ See: *Conversation with President of Iran Hassan Rouhani*, available in Russian at [<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57197>], 4 April, 2018.

²⁰ See: *Meeting of the Presidents of Russia, Turkey and Iran*, available at [<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57199>] 4 April, 2018.

²¹ *Meeting with President of Iran Hassan Rouhani and President of Turkey Recept Tayyip Erdoğan*, available at [<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58482>] 7 September 2018.

²² See: *Ibidem*.

²³ See: *Ibidem*.

²⁴ See: “Putin, Erdoğan, Rouhani talk Syria in Sochi,” available at [<https://www.dw.com/en/putin-erdogan-rouhani-talk-syria-in-sochi/a-47512393>], 14 February, 2019.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

A weaker Syria, or even its disappearance from the world map, will undermine the positions of Iran as a Shi'a leader. Iran had no choice but to enter the Syrian crisis and rely not only on volunteers, but also on the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the elite detachment of the Iranian army.

In the fall of 2015, when Tehran considerably increased its aid to Hezbollah and the Syrian government by increasing the numerical strength of its military ground-based contingents, the Russian-Iranian relations in the context of the Syrian crisis and its settlement acquired a new quality and new meanings.

Russia and Iran drew closer, while their relations reached a higher level mainly because both countries were determined to support Assad and keep Saudi Arabia and the U.S. within certain limits in the Middle East. There were other factors: the Russian and Iranian concepts of the world order, the regional security complex and the role of the U.S. in the Middle East, as well as the crisis of the previous agreements on the Iranian nuclear program and the anti-Iranian and anti-Russian sanctions.²⁶

From the very beginning of the Syrian conflict, Moscow and Tehran occupied relatively similar positions: territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Syrian Arab Republic; their concerted political and military efforts played the main role in Syrian territorial integrity and protection of the Assad regime. So far, the final post-conflict settlement and maintain the key role of Moscow and Tehran look vague. This suggests the following question: is Moscow-Tehran cooperation strategic or tactical; is it a long-term and mutually profitable cooperation or ad hoc interaction?

Treaty on the basis of mutual relations and the principles of cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation enacted on 5 April, 2002 serves as the legal foundation of their bilateral relations.²⁷ The two sides are engaging in comprehensive cooperation, from military-technical, trade and economic (including interregional) to the contacts in the humanitarian sphere.

Moscow and Tehran are equally interested in preserving their influence in the Middle East; in Syria, in particular, they want to retain their military and political presence for a long time and to realize their economic projects.

The Russian-Iranian line can be clearly seen in the settlement of the Syrian crisis in its military and political (talks on political settlement) contexts. Certain aspects of their interrelations, however, do not allow the sides to raise their relations to a strategic level.

Deeply rooted ideological differences are the main problem. As an independent sovereign state Russia has not yet acquired a clear national identity and a national idea, however, it is a secular state where the Church is separated from the state. Following the Islamic revolution, Iran opted to become an Islamic state, where foreign policy is determined by religious rules and missions.

The second problem that is just as significant: there is no more or less common opinion about Russia in the Iranian political establishment. The concept of Iranian foreign policy presupposes an independent foreign policy course; it presumes that the Islamic republic should become not only a regional leader, but also an important international actor. The Supreme Leader of Iran (rahbar), president and the acting political party have very different ideas about the ways and means of realization of this concept.

In 1989, the Assembly of Experts elected Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a consistent supporter and defender of the Islamic revolution, Supreme Leader. His ideological position is obviously anti-American and anti-Western, which gained further significance after the Arab Spring, as it gave rise to the Islamic Awakening concept. Ayatollah is convinced, "Currently, we can witness the bullying and

²⁶ See: *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Statement and Answers to Media Questions at a Joint News Conference Following Talks with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif*, Moscow, 17 August, 2015, available at [<http://en.interaffairs.ru/lavrov/605-foreign-minister-sergey-lavrovs-statement-and-answers-to-media-questions-at-a-joint-news-conference-following-talks-with-iranian-foreign-minister-mohammad-javad-zarif-moscow-august-17-2015.html>], 17 August, 2015.

²⁷ See: *Treaty on the basis for mutual relations and the principles of cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation*, available in Russian at [<http://www.kremlin.ru/supplement/3290>], 12 March, 2001.

interference of America and some of its followers in the region in the countries in which the breeze of awakening has turned into the storm of uprisings and revolutions.” He argues that the Muslims should return to true Islam free from modern distortions. Iran can and should head the movement towards a single Muslim nation.²⁸ Ali Khamenei insists that Iran will invariably side with the suppressed peoples and the states of the “axis of resistance,” Syria being one of them.²⁹

This causes a lot of concerns in the West and among the regional leaders, which explains Washington’s obvious intention to continue its policy of suppressing Tehran’s regional ambitions and its political influence on the Shi’a ummah.

There is no unity in the ranks of the Iranian elite. In fact, Tehran inherited its close trade and economic cooperation with Europe and the United States from the times of the shah. The Islamic revolution and the sanctions limited its scope to a certain extent, but not its importance. The nuclear agreement reopened the doors to former dimensions of economic cooperation. This explains why today part of the political establishment (the left-wing party, in particular, with a faction in the parliament), on the whole, supports the Western, rather than the Russian, vector. It was the sanctions and the situation in Syria that made Iran’s rapprochement with Russia and China possible.³⁰

Moscow, in its turn, solves its tactical military tasks thanks to Iran’s involvement in the Syrian conflict. The Kremlin stakes on Iran in the negotiations and post-conflict settlement, yet Russian leaders are not ready to support the Islamic Republic completely: Russia coordinates its activity in Syria with the United States; it is involved in consultations with Israel and in negotiations with Saudi Arabia. Russia pursues the role of a mediator in the negotiation process on Syria. It is involved in the Geneva process, launched the mechanism of negotiations in Astana and has raised the status of Iran and Turkey as guarantors of the Syrian ceasefire.³¹

On the other hand, Russia’s support of Iran is not limitless; on certain occasions it might contain its influence in the negotiation process. In October 2018, Tehran was not invited to the talks in Istanbul (the four-partite summit), because Russia, having taken the fairly sharp contradictions between Tehran and Istanbul into account, opted for the summit’s success, which meant that Iran had to be excluded.

The future of negotiations depends to a great extent on Iran’s military presence in Syria. Today, this is the strongest irritant for Israel, the U.S., and European countries. Iran explains that it was invited by the Syrian government and describes its forces as “advisors” and “defenders of the (Shi’a) holy places.”

Tel Aviv repeatedly expressed its disagreement with the Iranian military presence in Syria, sometimes by delivering air strikes at Iranian targets. The United States insists that “all Iranian and Iranian-backed forces” (not the terrorist groups) should be removed from Syria. John Bolton, former National Security Advisor of the United States, never missed the chance to confirm that this was one of Washington’s priorities and a subject of repeated consultations with his Russian colleagues. Israel and the United States are convinced that Russia should “abandon Iran, its situational ally” on Syria.³²

²⁸ *Supreme Leader’s Speech at Inauguration of Islamic Awakening and Ulama Conference*, available at [<http://www.leader.ir/langs/en/index.php?p=contentShow- &id=10574>].

²⁹ “Manifestations of the Holy Koran در و شلا دى اق”, available at [<http://www.alalam.ir/news/3601196/%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9--%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%83%D9%84-%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AE-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF>].

³⁰ See: A. Vakhshiteh, “Rossia i Iran v syriyskom uregulirovanii: strategicheskoe partnerstvo ili takticheskii soiuz?” *Vlast*, No. 1, 2019, pp. 279-287.

³¹ For more details, see: A. Vakhshiteh, M.V. Lapenko, “Syriyskoe uregulirovanie v ramkakh peregovornogo protsessa v Astane,” *Sovremennye evraziyskie issledovaniya*, No. 3, 2017, pp. 24-37.

³² See: “John Bolton predlagaet obmeniat Iran na dialog,” available at [<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3719136>], 21 August, 2018.

The Kremlin hinted that it could not put pressure on Tehran: continued Iranian presence “on the ground” seemed very important.

The future of bilateral cooperation will depend on the closely intertwined military, diplomatic and economic aspects.³³

Both countries want the speediest possible normalization in Syria with their continued military presence on its territory and are building up the necessary conditions. Moscow has created the legal and material foundations for its military bases in Syria. Iran and Syria signed a “defense and technical agreement that provides for the continued presence and participation of Iran in Syria.”³⁴

There is another component of equal significance—the negotiation process and post-conflict political development of the Syrian Republic. In this context Russia will continue preserving its leading role in the negotiations on Syria and will lobby, to the best of its abilities, the Iranian interests at the international level. Moscow is trying to assume the role of an intermediary in Iranian-American and Iranian-Israeli relations. It stands a very small chance, since Iran is not ready to retreat.

Trade and economic cooperation and economic rehabilitation of the Syrian republic are another very important aspect and the sphere of Tehran’s and Moscow’s long-term interests.

On the whole, the involvement of both countries in the settlement of the Syrian conflict raised the Russian-Iranian relations to a new long-term development level. So far, this cannot be considered a “strategic partnership” (even if officials frequently use this term), rather, it is a mutually advantageous cooperation and a tactical alliance.

On 25 January, 2019, in his exclusive interview to CNN, Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia Sergey Ryabkov relied on diplomatic terminology to answer a direct question about the alliance of Russia and Iran in Syria: “I would not use this type of words to describe where we are with Iran” and added that Russia did not “underestimate the importance of measures that would ensure very strong security of the state of Israel.”³⁵

Over the last decade, Moscow has been trying to occupy a pro-active and central position on the international arena, first and foremost, in the Middle East. It conducts diplomatic consultations and talks with all parties to the international and regional agenda. In the Syrian case, Moscow is involved in an active dialog with Bashar Assad, Iran and Turkey and the Syrian opposition, as well as with Saudi Arabia, the U.S., and Israel.

Moscow is trying to find common points with each of the sides, to avoid confrontation of blocs of states or a conflict of interests with other regional leaders in the Middle East. Moscow’s geopolitical approach may offer Tehran unique opportunities or become a serious challenge.

If Iran, like Russia, joins the “win-win” game according to its national interests, it may somewhat suppress the conflict potential of its relations with other regional and trans-regional players in the Syrian crisis to become Russia’s strong strategic partner.

If, on the other hand, Iran insists on the only successful game to ensure its national interests, conflicts with other players are slated to exacerbate; Russia will become a hostage of its geopolitical plans, Syrian settlement will become even harder to achieve and the Russian-Iranian strategic partnership will be never realized.³⁶

³³ For more details, see: A. Vakhshiteh, op. cit.

³⁴ “Iranian Advisors Will Remain in Syria” *روزنامه ناری نارانشتم* *رواح* available at [http://www.irma.ir/fa/News/83015249].

³⁵ “Russia, Iran and the Widening Trust Deficit in Syria,” available at [https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/russia-iran-and-the-widening-trust-deficit-in-syria-24090], 12 February, 2019.

³⁶ See: A. Vakhshiteh, “Russia can Solve Certain Problems of Iran with the U.S. *ناری تالکشم ی خرب دناوتیم هیسور*” available at [http://www.russiaviewer.com/gap/6124/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%87-%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%AE%DB%8C-].

Conclusion

The Syrian crisis has become a watershed of sorts for Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East: no longer a passive observer of regional processes of the Arab Spring period, Russia became an active participant and mediator. It demonstrated that it was ready for an equal partnership and a new model of American-Russian interaction based on the common interests and shared ideas about the regional challenges and threats. Washington did not reciprocate. From that time on, Russia's stakes in Syrian settlement are on the regional leaders—the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Turkish Republic. Together they form a successful tripartite alliance.

Military-political cooperation between Russia, Turkey and Iran helps settle the Syrian crisis, it ensured successful struggle against ISIS and a ceasefire agreement.

The diplomats of the three countries are successfully cooperating on the Syrian agenda. They have established tripartite summits as a specific format of their cooperation and, at the same time, they actively use the bilateral format of direct negotiations and consultations. The dialog between the three countries at the level of heads of state is highly sustainable; the sides are equally interested in agreements based on compromises.

The Astana negotiation platform initiated by Russia, Turkey, and Iran, the guarantors of a peaceful agreement between the Syrian government and the opposition, played a positive role in the process. So far, thirteen rounds of Astana negotiations have been realized. They made it possible to cut short the fighting on Syrian territory, set up four zones of de-escalation (and close down three of them when peaceful life had been restored); lower the level of violence and make deliveries of humanitarian aid possible. The Congress of the National Dialog achieved an agreement on setting up a Constitutional Council and its composition.

The tripartite alliance of Russia, Iran and Turkey is a tactical arrangement. Today, it is being tested by the situation in Idlib and the buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian border; the future of the Moscow-Tehran relationships depends on the withdrawal of Iranian troops from Syria.
