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## Political Cooperation between Iran and Russia in the Syrian Crisis with the Approach of Realism 2010-2017

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### Abstract:

The Syrian civil war, which has been labeled as one of the most significant crises in the Middle East, has turned this region into a scene of cooperation and competition among regional and trans-regional powers. The geographical scope of the conflict, the occurrence of extremely severe violence, and the direct and indirect involvement of international actors in operational battlefields have made this crisis one of the unique examples in the last decade. The nature of international phenomena has shown that regional and major powers, in a multilateral framework, are seeking to stabilize the balance of power in the international environment alongside cooperation and competition. The crisis in Syria has shown signs of such relations between Russia and Iran since 2010. Now, the question that arises here, which this article aims to examine and find an answer to within the framework of realism theory, is: "What impact has the Syrian crisis had on increasing political cooperation between Iran and Russia during the years 2010-2017?" Based on this question, the proposed hypothesis is that "the relatively common perspective of Iran and Russia on regional and international developments, although with sometimes differing foundational goals, provided the groundwork for joint cooperation between the two countries in various dimensions, particularly in the political sphere, within the framework of supporting the established government in Syria."

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**Keywords:** Syrian crisis, civil war, Russia's foreign policy, Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy, regional competition

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**Introduction**

With the onset of the political crisis in Syria, regional and transregional actors, based on their interests and preferences, adopted various orientations regarding this country, which holds special geopolitical and geostrategic importance in the Middle East. Among these, the persistent efforts of some governments to apply pressure and overthrow Bashar al-Assad's regime stand out as prominent aspects of the Syrian developments, which have further complicated the situation in this country. Russia and Iran, in line with their perceptions of their own capacities and capabilities, have taken on roles in regional and international order-making. The cooperation between Iran and Russia in Syria, under the shadow of common interests, has taken on a new form of strategic political and geopolitical partnership. Although some distrust has historically created differences in perspective between the two sides, this political partnership between Iran and Russia undoubtedly counts as a significant achievement for Iran, enhancing its regional influence.

Regardless of the nature of the issues in Syria, regional and transregional countries had differing views on the developments in this country for various reasons. In recent years, Iran and Russia have adopted similar critical stances regarding the unilateral approaches in international relations taken by the United States, NATO's expansion to the east, the plan to deploy missile defense systems in the Czech Republic and Poland and later in Turkey, the occurrence of color revolutions in areas surrounding Russia, the activities of Western-oriented cultural and political institutions, and the expansion of Western economic activities, particularly in the energy sector. From this perspective, the views of both countries on the

developments in Syria should be seen as a shared concern about the expansion of Western influence in the strategic Middle East region. The Russians are well aware that if the current political system in Syria collapses, the entire region will fall under the dominance of the West, especially the United States, which would be a significant loss for a resurgent Russia. Iran also views Syria as an important and strategic point in the axis of resistance against Israel and the Western world in the region. Therefore, the fall of the current government and the rise of a Western-oriented government are by no means in line with the strategic interests of Iran and Russia. The importance of this issue is so great that Russia, unlike its approach to the developments in other Middle Eastern countries, especially Libya, has entered the Syrian developments with full force.

**Research Background:**

Ammar Jelo (2024), in an article written in Arabic titled "Forced Participation or Sensitive Competitive Cooperation," attempts to examine the formation of Iran-Russia cooperation in Syria and to consider the impact of the Gaza war and the Israeli regime's attacks on Iran's positions in Syria on this type of cooperation. The author tries to show that Russia has a neutral stance in the Israeli regime's attacks on Iran's positions, which directly affects Tehran-Moscow cooperation.

Azizi (2024), in an article written in Arabic titled "Iran-Syria Relations Amidst Regional Dynamics and Re-Creation," seeks to address the impact of the scenario of improved relations between Iran and Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, and Syria's return to the Arab League on Tehran-Damascus relations. In this changing scenario, Iran is likely to use

renewed relations with its Arab counterparts—especially Syria—to strengthen and legitimize its regional position. However, the shared hostility of Tehran and Damascus towards Israel is in complete contrast to the Arab-Israeli normalization, which may make it difficult for Arab countries to get involved in Syria.

Rafiee Basiri and colleagues (2023) in an article titled "Analyzing the Contexts and Reasons for the Strategic Alliance Between Iran and Russia in Syria" believe that the existence of long-term political and economic interests and a common enemy of Iran and Russia in Syria has led to operational cooperation between the two countries at the strategic alliance level, which has successfully resulted in the stabilization of the Syrian government and securing the interests of both countries. However, this strategic alliance has been influenced by historical perceptions governing the relations between the two countries, especially the mindset of some Iranian and Russian elites, which will face a significant challenge in transitioning to a strategic alliance in international politics.

Grajewski (2021), in an English-language article titled "The Evolution of Russia-Iran Cooperation in Syria," attempts to demonstrate that although Russia and Iran have converged around the general goal of strengthening the Assad regime, Moscow-Tehran partnership in Syria presents a complex mosaic of overlapping interests, broader regional conflicts, and contrasting approaches to post-war reconstruction. The views of Russia and Iran on the future of Syria include differing perspectives on military reforms and economic investments. However, it is unlikely that these differences will lead to a breakdown in the relationship. Moscow and Tehran have learned from their experiences in reducing tactical differences in military campaigns and are likely

to limit areas of interest in Syria, as both seek to exploit the political and economic benefits of close relations with Damascus.

Darayandeh and colleagues (2019) in an article titled "Examining the Contexts of Cooperation and Disagreement Between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia in the Syrian Crisis" discuss the mutual needs and international and regional requirements that have facilitated cooperation between Iran and Russia in the security domain to counter common security threats. On the other hand, the approach of the two countries in the political resolution process and the structure of the Syrian government in post-conflict conditions, as well as their efforts for greater influence and role, and the nature of their relationships with other actors involved in Syria, are sources of disagreement between the two countries. The authors conclude that the cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia in the Syrian crisis has been tactical. They have cooperated due to temporary mutual needs, but as the grounds for cooperation weaken, the differences between the two countries have become and will become more pronounced.

Vafaiefard and colleagues (2019) in a study titled "The Future of Iran-Russia Relations Over Syria (Cooperation or Conflict?)" attempt to examine the possible scenarios that could arise in Iran-Russia relations over Syria using a future studies approach and relying on the scenario-writing method. The strategic implications of each scenario for the Islamic Republic of Iran are analyzed. The findings suggest that among the three general scenarios—dominance of cooperation, movement toward dominance of conflict, and coincidence of cooperation/conflict—the third scenario seems the most likely. This is because, on one hand, the two countries have enduring and common geopolitical and ideological concerns, while on the other hand, they have different

approaches, programs, and policies regarding the developments in Syria to address these concerns.

Darayandeh and Ahmadi (2018) in an article titled "Russia's Policy in the Syrian Crisis and Its Implications for Iran's National Interests" aim to examine Russia's policy in Syria and its impact on Iran. In this regard, they believe that Russia's policy in the Syrian crisis is an effort to create a balance in the international system and to counter existing threats from the West and the U.S. that endanger this country's security and national interests. The temporary alignment of Russia's policies with Iran's has secured Iran's national interests. However, the differing approaches of these two countries and the nature of their actions could create challenges.

Farshad Gohar and colleagues (2017) in an article titled "Analyzing Iran-Russia Relations with an Emphasis on the Syrian Crisis" believe that Russia's Eurasianism policy has highlighted Iran's position in Russia's foreign policy, and the relatively continuous relations between the two countries during the Syrian crisis have transformed Tehran-Moscow relations. However, the structural factors of the international and regional systems have prevented a strategic and long-term alliance between the two countries.

Mousavi (2017) in a study titled "Structural Realism and the Position of Syria in the Regional Policies of Iran and Russia" seeks to discuss and examine the factors that have drawn Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran's attention to Syria. Iran and Russia, for various historical, geopolitical reasons, and to preserve their national interests and security, oppose the expansion of Western political, economic, and military influence in regions

surrounding them, and they play a significant role in shaping the new Syria.

Julien Barnes-Dacey and others (2013), in a collection of articles titled "The Regional Struggle for Syria," examine the dimensions and scope of this conflict, considering the approaches of each of the regional actors, including the Gulf States, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Israel, the Kurds, and Turkey. The authors believe that the internal crisis in Syria has largely created new equations centered around new strategic competitions in the Middle East, and the spillover of the crisis in Syria could extend to Iraq, Lebanon, and even Turkey. In the context of Russia's relations with Syria in the recent crisis, numerous works have been written.

Richard N. Haass (2012), in an article titled "Syria Beyond the UN Veto," compares the Western stance with the positions of Russia and China regarding Syria. He defines the reason for Russia and China's veto not only as opposition to the use of military force to remove Bashar al-Assad but also as opposition to the legitimization of any intervention in the internal affairs of states. Fyodor Lukyanov, in an article titled "Why Russia's Position on Syria Has Confounded Everyone," explains the reason for Russia's stance in Syria. Lukyanov suggests that Russia is not actually supporting the Syrian regime but rather the norms related to how crises are resolved, and Russia's opposition to the fall of the Assad regime is because such an event would only lead to further chaos.

#### **Theoretical Framework:**

Realism is a French term derived from the root "réel," meaning real. (Seyed Hosseini, 1996, p. 155) Realism means the primacy of external reality. In Persian, it has been translated as realism, reality-oriented, and sometimes even

truth-oriented, which essentially refers to the doctrine of the primacy of reality (realism). This term has considerable conceptual complexity and encompasses various domains of thought such as art, philosophy, aesthetics, ethics, literature, politics, and social sciences. In the fields of art history and criticism, it has also been used with different meanings, but its concept generally refers to the tendency to represent things accurately and objectively. In a more specific sense, it refers to a movement that emerged in the 19th century in France, characterized by opposition to conventional historical, mythological, and religious subjects, instead focusing on non-idealized and demythologized concepts of modern life. (Anousheh, 2001, p. 615)

The school of realism is the opposite of the school of idealism; that is, a school that denies the existence of the external world and considers everything as mental imaginations and perceptions. Realism means the primacy of external reality. This school acknowledges the existence of the external world, independent of human perception, whereas idealists consider all entities and what we perceive in this world as mental perceptions dependent on the individual's mind. They believe that if I, who perceive everything, do not exist, I cannot say that anything exists. However, according to the realist view, even if we humans disappear, the external world will still exist. In general, a realist considers the entities of the external world to be real and having an existence independent of their own mind. Based on this, it can be said that all humans are realists because everyone believes in the existence of an external world. Even idealists are realists in their lives and behavior because they must consider the external world to exist in order to act or even speak. The main founders of realism in France were lesser-known writers and poets who explicitly opposed the school of idealism.

Among these individuals were Champ fleury, Murger, and Duranty. The first field in which realism made its mark was painting, with Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) being one of its pioneers. Balzac (1799-1850) was also the first person who, through writing novels in the series "The Human Comedy," raised social issues more seriously. Besides French writers, other writers emerged in various parts of the world who played a significant role in awakening people through their works. (Anousheh, 2001, p. 615). The true goal of realism is to identify the impact of environment and society on life's realities and to accurately analyze and introduce the "types" that have emerged in a specific society. (Tabatabaei et al, 2002, p. 81) This approach, due to its long history and to align itself with trends and developments in the international system, has been divided into various types. One of the classifications of realist approaches is based on the time period, which divides it into classical realism (up to the early 20th century), modern realism (1939-1979), and neo-realism (after 1979). (Abdollahkhani, 2010, p. 59) Another classification of realism is based on the subject, as conducted by Walker. He divided realists into two categories: historical and structural. Among them, Machiavelli is considered the founder of the historical approach, which involves rejecting eternal truths and focusing on knowledge based on conditions, believing in change as a continuous process, the necessity of maintaining caution as a permanent principle, disbelief in universal moral principles, and the exclusion of morality in its general sense from the realm of politics. E. H. Carr is also a contemporary promoter of this approach, emphasizing the interaction between power and morality (meaning the use of morality by power), consent and coercion, and power and persuasion as the main principles. (Baylis et al, 2001, p. 27) According to Walker, structural realism

dates back to Thucydides, but structural realism is divided into two types (Type 1 and Type 2). Morgenthau is known as a promoter of structural realism Type 1, and Kenneth Waltz as a promoter of Type 2. The most central view of the early proponents of structural realism is the issue of "power politics" and the idea that power is the law of human behavior. The promoter of structural realism Type 1 emphasizes human nature as the determining structure and believes that politics has its own objective and specific laws rooted in human nature, and success depends on understanding these laws and setting goals based on them. Structural realism Type 2 prominently emphasizes the independence of the structure of the international system and equates the anarchic nature of the international system, meaning the lack of supreme authority, with war, considering war as a natural occurrence in the international system. (Abdollahkhani, 2004, p. 60) There are other classifications of realism, such as liberal realism, promoted by Thomas Hobbes. He emphasizes a permanent cold war. Another type of classification is "defensive realism" versus "offensive realism," promoted by Kenneth Waltz, Joseph Grieco, and Charles Glaser, focusing on security as the main interest and maximizing power to the extent of ensuring survival. On the other hand, John Mearsheimer is a proponent of offensive realism, emphasizing the maximization of power as a goal to achieve a hegemonic position in the international system and as the main behavior of states, particularly great powers. Realists' views on morality are that 1- Politics from a realist perspective is inherently immoral, and on this basis, realism does not prescribe any actions to states and rulers and has no normative guidance. 2- Politics is anti-moral, and based on this reasoning, realism

has a normative prescription for actors at the level of international relations to act based on their own interests rather than moralities. Since there is no justice in the realm of international relations, no limitations should be imposed on the behavior of states. (Moshirzadeh et al, 2010, p. 202)

In general, all realists, despite differences in viewpoints, are united by a common source in the three principles of statism, self-help, and collective survival, which essentially constitute the core and foundation of realism across its various branches. Other principles of realists, especially in the realm of security, include issues such as international security, insecurity, survival, military-centered security, self-reliance in achieving security, and state-centrism in security authority. (Abdollahi Khani, 2004, p. 62). All trends in realism emphasize survival as the superior goal of actors in the international system. Waltz says in this regard: "Beyond the motive of survival, the goals of states are infinitely diverse." Realists, by proposing the concept of survival, equate security with survival, and survival is understood as the possibility of the state's continued existence in the international system. Due to Machiavelli's key role in power-centered thought and the evolution of realism by Hans Morgenthau and Mearsheimer, their characters and perspectives are first examined. Niccolò Machiavelli, an Italian politician and philosopher (1469–1527), in his books "The Prince" and "Discourses," considers the aim of political action to be the attainment of power and thus does not limit it to any moral judgment. As a result, he deems the use of any means in politics to advance goals permissible, thereby completely separating politics from ethics. The governing spirit of both books is the same, and Machiavelli's fundamental objective and

heartfelt aspiration in both of his seemingly contradictory books is to create a powerful state and stable government in his homeland, Italy. (Nemati Limani, 2012, p. 2)

Throughout his political writings, Machiavelli never decisively sides with a single political current. In his writings, one can find statements that are more conservative, more reformist, or more revolutionary. He believes that a ruler, if he wants to remain and succeed, should not fear wickedness and violent actions because without wickedness, the preservation of the state is not possible. To achieve power and maintain it, a government is permitted to resort to any act, such as killing, betrayal, terror, deceit, and so on. Machiavelli, who founded the school of Machiavellianism, believes that political figures should be completely realistic, materialistic, and serious, and so strict that if religious duties, ethics, and sentiments stand in their way, they should disregard them and aim solely for their objective. In this approach, politics in religious governance becomes an end in itself, with ethics and religion revolving around political interests. (Gholamhosseini & Khajeh, 2013, p. 108)

The nature of modern Western thought begins with Machiavelli and his famous work "The Prince" and is built on the foundation he laid, which is summarized by the slogan "the end justifies the means." Machiavelli says, "People are so simple and so subject to their immediate needs that a deceiver will always find someone who is willing to be deceived." Combine these two, and you have what Machiavelli calls cunning deceit. A ruler who wants power must also always be good. This idea aligns with our notion of meritocracy; to reach the top, one must be better than others, regardless of the criteria by which this goodness is measured. Being overly scrupulous about adhering to moral principles at all costs is unrealistic and foolish. Machiavelli's reputation as

a proponent and defender of power politics remains strong worldwide. His political writings have been described by some critics as justifications for the interests of the powerful and the use of any means to achieve goals, but the duality and ambiguity in Machiavelli's thought indicate its relevance and freshness. Even nearly five centuries later, Machiavelli's political ideas are still discussed and analyzed by those who comment on or are engaged in politics.

In the twentieth century, figures like Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, and in the current century, George Bush, were influenced by Machiavelli's ideas. Machiavelli's political philosophy is founded on the unchanging nature of humanity and a pessimistic view of human nature. Contrary to the Enlightenment, which considers humans inherently good, Machiavelli, and later Hobbes, view humans as inherently evil, corrupt, and malicious. Both Machiavelli and Hobbes derive the legitimacy of the state's monopoly on force from the inherent wickedness of human nature. This anthropological pessimism forms the starting point of Machiavelli's political thought and provides suggestions for modern states, such as the idea that only through force and coercion can continuity be ensured. This reveals the fundamental difference between political coexistence in the modern era and the Middle Ages. While in the Middle Ages, the concept of loyalty was the foundation of the political community, the modern state is embodied in distrust and suspicion of its citizens. Thus, Machiavelli's anthropological pessimism, as a logical proposal for states, can be regarded as his greatest innovation in securing their legitimacy. (Gholamhosseini & Khajeh, 2013, p. 109)

Hans Morgenthau was born in Coburg, Germany, in 1904 and passed away in 1980. In the first half of the twentieth century, he was one of the founders of political realism. Initially

influenced by Nietzsche's ideas, he later became interested in the thoughts of Max Weber, Hans Kelsen, Carl Schmitt, and Reinhold Niebuhr. In 1937, he moved to the United States and taught at the University of Kansas and the University of Chicago. He published his famous work, "Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace," in Chicago, which had a profound impact on American diplomatic thought. (Mearsheimer, 2007, p. 592)

Morgenthau identifies the most important human instinct as the will to power, which manifests in three ways: the increase of power, the maintenance of power, and the demonstration of power. He lists eight primary factors as the foundation of power: 1. Geographic position, 2. Natural resources, 3. Industrial capacity, 4. Military readiness, 5. Population, 6. National character, 7. National morale, 8. Quality of diplomacy. (Haghshenas, 2009, p. 15)

Morgenthau accepts Aristotle's definition of man as a political animal. He believes that human behavior should be examined in its historical, social, and cultural context. He considers the balance of power to be unstable and therefore unfit for scientific, mechanical, and quantitative study. In fact, by stating the inability to objectively determine and evaluate a country's power, he attempts to demonstrate the uncertainty and non-scientific nature of the balance of power. (Moshirzadeh et al, 2010, p. 200)

Morgenthau, in the field of international relations, achieved significant success with his power-centered ideas, which were based on an idealistic approach rooted in military power and an excessive emphasis on the security-power perspective. As a result, his theories have been regarded as an effective and usable framework by Western, especially American,

politicians and strategists. In general, realists depict a relatively grim picture of world politics. From their perspective, the international system is a battlefield where countries ruthlessly seek opportunities to exploit and gain advantages over each other, where trust has no place. In this arena, daily life is essentially a struggle for power, and each country not only strives to be the strongest player in the system but also ensures that no other country achieves that dominant position. Proponents of this school, by providing an analysis of the motivations behind the actions and behavior of countries on the international stage, have solidified a general theory and guiding principle that has led countries into a dangerous cycle of power: "The pursuit of greater military power in response to potential threats from other countries." However, since the increase of a state's military power inevitably leads to other states striving to increase their military power, this process grows self-defeating and self-destructive elements within itself, casting a shadow of intensified insecurity over the global community. This trend, unquestionably, becomes more dangerous and concerning with the development of technological capabilities in the production of weapons, especially weapons of mass destruction. (Afrough, 1997, p. 12)

Hans Morgenthau was one of the proponents of the balance of power theory, which is the oldest, most enduring, and most controversial theory of international politics. (Ghodousi, 2010, p. 10) From Morgenthau's perspective, politics is the politics of power, and the primary outcomes are determined by the inequalities in the spatial distribution of power worldwide. He believes that power encompasses a wide range of social relations, starting from pure physical violence to the subtlest



psychological influences. He sees power as something that enables the domination of one human over another and ensures its continuity. Morgenthau had a very broad view of power, and for some like-minded researchers, power covers the entire sphere of politics. It is evident that some measurable elements, many of which are geographical, should contribute to a state's power. Elements such as the extent of territory, population, territorial position, and the like are among these. This led to efforts by geopoliticians to access physical sources of power, which explains Germany's actions during World War II in this context. (Ghodousi et al, 2009, p. 12)

Typically, the following statements are made in defining Morgenthau's realism:

- The field of international relations consists of immoral and malevolent actors, including:
  - a) These immoral actors are interest-driven and always in pursuit of power;
  - b) These actors can be reduced to specific characteristics such as being rational, self-centered, and self-ish, and such a situation allows for the prediction and understanding of their behavior in the field of international relations.
- The absence of an institution to punish violators of international norms, in connection with the immoral characteristics of actors, has led to a state of anarchy (a state of Hobbesian anarchy) in the field of international relations.
- Consequentialism is the most important moral justification for the behavior of actors in such a situation. Morality and justice are only seen as tools for advancing interests, and the outcomes of actions must justify them.
- Power is a tool for survival and the most legitimate goal and means in the anarchic environment of international relations.
- Rulers, whose primary concern is maintaining the unity and well-being of their people, always seek power as the primary goal, and

such conduct ensures the continuity of the system.

- Behaviors that occur within the above-outlined framework can be formulated within scientific laws. Given the existence of such laws, it can be stated as a general law that rulers always seek power. (Moshirzadeh & KhanlarKhani, 2009, p. 194)

John Mearsheimer is also a theorist of offensive realism who believes that states live in a world filled with various threats and are entities that tend to maximize their power to ensure their survival. According to Mearsheimer, the main reason for states' power-seeking behavior can be found in three things: the anarchic structure, the system of offensive capabilities that all states possess, and the uncertainty about the intentions and objectives of enemies. Among these, what is most important for explaining international relations are structural factors such as anarchy and the distribution of power. Like other realists, he does not consider international institutions significant and believes that although states sometimes act through institutions, what is essential is the distribution of power among countries. In his view, it is the powerful states that shape institutions to maintain or even increase their share of global power. He emphasizes that states "must" act according to what offensive realism dictates, as this is the best way to survive in this dangerous world. (Gholamhosseini and Khajeh, 2013, p. 109)

### **Political Cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia within the Framework of the Syrian Crisis:**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the removal of the security threat from Russia on Iran's borders, the heavy atmosphere governing Iran-Russia relations softened, and Russia transformed from an enemy into a supportive

country for creating deterrence against the United States. The realist self-help conditions governing international relations led Iran to move away from the policy of "Neither East, Nor West" and towards a policy of "Alignment or Union" with other countries. In this context, Iran sought to achieve a form of strategic cooperation with powers rivaling the U.S., especially Russia and China, to advance its confrontational foreign policy (Haji Yousefi, 2005, p. 64).

For Iran, expanding relations with Russia could not only compensate for the lack of cooperation with the West but also help enhance Iran's influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Within this framework, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia share many common interests; Central Asia, the Caucasus, West Asia, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Yemen, North Africa, the Caspian Sea, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, are areas and subjects in which both Iran and Russia have vital interests. Russia emphasizes the common interests of both countries in countering the hegemonic policies of the United States globally and particularly in West Asia. Russians also point out that Russia and Iran face common challenges of political radicalism and extremism in their shared neighborhoods from Afghanistan to Syria, highlighting that Russia prioritizes security and geopolitical issues (Kortunov, 2021, p. 20). Among these, Syria, due to the longstanding presence of Soviet Union bases there, its location at the heart of the resistance axis, and the presence of Salafi movements, holds special significance for both Moscow and Tehran. Therefore, the Syrian crisis, due to these shared interests, has led to a new chapter in the level and depth of their relations.

In 2000, according to Pentagon classifications, Syria was designated as a rogue state and a supporter of terrorism, and the war against Syria was assessed as part of the broader war against Iran, with Iran, Iraq, and Syria prioritized for regime change in the new century. In other words, Syria is a hostage of the U.S. to pressure Iran. Syria is also Iran's strategic ally against the group of Arab countries led by Saudi Arabia, as well as Israel. For Iran, Syria is considered the front line of defense against the United States and Israel. Syria is part of the resistance axis against Israel, which includes Iran, Lebanon, and jihadist groups like Hamas and Hezbollah (Asadi, 2011, p. 18). In addition to regional actors, Syria has provided a conducive ground for highlighting the concrete commonalities between Iran and Russia concerning international developments and the Middle East. Both countries, due to various historical, geopolitical reasons, and the preservation of their national interests and security, oppose the expansion of the political, economic, and military influence of the Western world in their surrounding regions. Hence, in recent years, Tehran and Moscow have adopted similar critical stances towards unilateral approaches in international relations by the United States, NATO's eastward expansion, the missile defense shield deployment in the Czech Republic and Poland, and then in Turkey, the occurrence of color revolutions in Russia's surrounding areas, the activities of Western cultural and political institutions, and the expansion of Western economic activities, especially in the energy sector. From this perspective, the view of both countries towards current developments in Syria should be seen as a shared concern about the spread of Western influence in the strategic Middle East region.

It is worth noting the 600-mile distance between Mosul and Grozny, with the former being the center of ISIS's caliphate and the latter a city where Russians have fought two wars in a decade. Russians are well aware that if the current political system in Syria is overthrown, the entire region will fall under Western, particularly American, control, which would be a significant loss for a resurgent Russia. Thus, Russia's approach to Syrian developments, in terms of sensitivity, type, and intensity of response, can be compared to Moscow's approach to its surrounding areas (near abroad). Russia's actions regarding Syria indicate that the issue of Syria is just as important to Russia, and if Moscow were to relinquish Syria, it would have to forfeit its role in the Middle East in favor of the West, an outcome entirely contrary to Moscow's grand and strategic interests (Rafiee Basiri, 2023, p. 36). Iran also views Syria as a strategic point in the resistance axis against Israel and the Western world in the region. In reality, Iran interprets the Syrian crisis as an Israeli-American strategy aimed at combating Tehran. From Iran's perspective, regime change in Syria is a prelude to regime change in Tehran (Wimmen & Assburg, 2013, p. 73).

Currently, geopolitically, Iran's strategic depth has expanded to the extent that the borders of Lebanon and Syria are considered the front-line of Iran's sphere of influence. In December 2011, former U.S. National Security Advisor Tom Donilon announced: "The end of the Assad regime will result in the largest setback for Iran in the region and the disruption and shift of the strategic power balance in the region against Iran" (Mohammadi, 2012, p. 22). Therefore, fundamental changes in Syria and the rise of a pro-Western government are by no means in line with the strategic interests of Iran and Russia.

### **The Position of Syria in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran**

Syria holds a special significance in Iran's foreign policy. This is primarily due to the good and historical relations between the two countries in the period following the victory of the [Islamic] Revolution. Syria was one of the first countries to recognize the new regime in Iran. During the Iran-Iraq war, Syria consistently supported Iran. On this basis, Hafez al-Assad condemned the Iraq-Iran war, calling it a wrong war, at a wrong time, and against the wrong enemy (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2011, p. 292). In November 1980, Syria opposed the creation of an Arab coalition against Iran and also tried to prevent the Soviet Union from supporting Iraq against Iran. Another aspect of Syria's importance is its confrontational policy against Israel, which forms the basis of the strategic alliance between the two countries. Syria is considered the only Arab country that stands on the front line in the fight against Israel. Syria is regarded as an important bridge between Iran and Hezbollah. Together with Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, Syria forms the axis of resistance (Koohkan & Tajari, 2014, p. 123).

It can be said with certainty that Syria has been Iran's strategic ally for the past forty years. Currently, in terms of geopolitics, this alliance has extended into Iran's strategic depth, such that the Lebanon-Syria border is considered the front line of Iran's sphere of influence. The importance of relations between the two countries is such that Ayatollah Khamenei, in a meeting with Bashar al-Assad in 2006, referred to Iran and Syria as each other's strategic depth and emphasized that these relations are among the oldest and most distinguished in the region. Therefore, Syria is a crucial arena for Iran's support of Palestinian and Lebanese resistance groups, regional role-playing, and expanding deterrence capabilities

against Israel and the West (Dehshiri and Abdollah Khani, 2015, p. 70).

According to the theory of realism, the motivation for survival is one of the most fundamental issues in the anarchic international system, as a result of which states only react and balance when they feel threatened. Therefore, Iran's presence in Syria is justifiable based on defensive realism due to the extreme insecurity (Rabiee et al., 2017, p. 74). The Syrian crisis and the involvement of regional and extra-regional powers have a direct connection to the interests and national security of the Islamic Republic of Iran; hence, it has been among the priorities of the country's foreign policy. Unrest and instability in the region affect Iran's security. From Iran's perspective, insecurity in the region means insecurity for Iran, and vice versa, insecurity for Iran is interpreted as insecurity for the region.

In fact, the policy of Iran's regional rival states in Syria was so aggressive that it made Iran perceive a security threat from these actors, leading to a balancing response (Rabiee et al., 2017, p. 74). Due to the strategic alliance between Iran and Syria, any change in the status quo could provide an opportunity for Iran's regional rivals, such as Saudi Arabia, to weaken Iran's position. Additionally, because of the support these two countries provide to the axis of resistance, a structural change in Syria could weaken the discourse of resistance and increase Israel's activism in the region. However, if Assad's government manages to emerge from the current crisis victoriously, it will be a significant achievement for Iran in the region. Iran's all-encompassing support for Syria will lead to greater trust from Syria towards Iran and enhance the country's anti-Zionist and anti-American motivations, which will undoubtedly strengthen the axis of

resistance and shift the balance of power in the region in favor of Iran (Barzegar, 2009, p. 135).

### **The Positions of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Syrian Crisis**

In the Syrian crisis, the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been primarily based on preserving strategic interests and influenced by the importance of this country in regional political-security equations. Therefore, in recent years, Iran has tried to support the Syrian government by adopting an approach to maintaining the status quo. Iran's presence in the Syrian crisis has been defensive in nature, aiming to repel security threats. Iran has intervened in Syria to prevent the weakening of the axis of resistance, to prevent the reduction of its regional power and influence, and to prevent the balance of power from shifting in favor of its regional rivals. In the diplomatic arena, Iran, while supporting Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, has opposed any foreign intervention in Syria and emphasized a political solution to the crisis. Iran insists on Syrian-Syrian dialogue. Iran's approach to the Syrian crisis is based on interaction with the international community to resolve the crisis and prioritizing the will of the Syrian people in determining the future political system of this country (Mirzadeh Kouhshayi, 2014, p. 186). The Islamic Republic of Iran, in close cooperation and alignment with Russia, initiated the Astana peace talks in January 2017 to resolve the crisis in Syria, with twelve rounds of negotiations held so far. Many experts believe that Syria's conflicts are, above all, a price that Damascus pays for being part of the regional resistance axis led by Iran. Accordingly, Syria, as Iran's strategic depth and its connection to militant groups

such as Hezbollah and Hamas, has been of particular importance to the Islamic Republic (Nejat and Jafari Valadani, 2013, p. 47). Therefore, Iran's primary interests in Syria can be evaluated within the framework of preserving and strengthening the axis of resistance and countering the expanding influence of regional and extra-regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United States. To these, Iran's efforts to combat extremism and takfiri groups should be added, as the Islamic Republic of Iran is concerned about the spread of Syria's unrest to the entire region. In fact, due to the historical friendly relations with Syria and the role this country plays in consolidating Iran's influence in the region, Iran has tried to seriously pursue its interests based on denying the dominance of foreign actors, especially the United States, in the region and strengthening the axis of resistance (Rogers, 2012, p. 4).

The Islamic Republic of Iran has never supported military solutions and the intervention of other countries, whether regional or Western, to resolve Syria's crisis. On the contrary, Iranian diplomatic officials and decision-makers have always believed that there is only one solution to the Syrian crisis, which is a political solution. The Islamic Republic of Iran emphasizes that the internal crisis in Syria should be resolved by the Syrian people and that any result in this regard should be determined by the will of the people of this country. Given this, the protective stance of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding the resolution of the Syrian crisis can be summarized in three important components: 1- The cessation of violence and the killing of people in Syria, 2- Non-intervention by foreign political and military forces, 3- The preservation of Bashar al-Assad's government alongside the emphasis on the necessity of internal reforms. There is no doubt that Iran views Syria as a strategic

ally in the Middle East region and has always presented the preservation of the Syrian government and support for Islamic groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah as one of the important goals in its foreign policy approach. Moreover, Iran considers Syria as a security defense shield in the region, which, if Bashar al-Assad's government collapses in Syria, could pose a major political challenge and dilemma for Iran in the region. For this reason, Iran provides financial, military, and security assistance to Bashar al-Assad's government in Syria (Niakooei et al., 2013, p. 134).

If Bashar al-Assad is victorious in Syria, Iran will not only become a regional power but also turn into a major pole and center of Shiites in the world. Therefore, the general policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran towards the Syrian crisis is opposition to any fundamental change in favor of the United States and its regional allies in Syria (Niakooei et al., 2013, p. 135). Considering the mentioned components, Iran has announced its full support for Syria and emphasized the necessity of implementing reforms and preserving national sovereignty in Syria (Nejat and Jafari Valadani, 2013, p. 41).

### **Syria's Position in Russia's Foreign Policy**

Based on Russia's foreign policy culture, the international system is inherently anarchic. Russia takes a realist approach to the international system (Ghavam, 2014, p. 515). With Putin's rise to power in Russia, the discourse of a normative great power became dominant in Russia's foreign policy. Accordingly, three principals were established as the basis of Russia's foreign policy: economic modernization, achieving a rightful position in global competition processes, and restoring Russia's status as a global great power. Toward the end of Putin's first presidential term, events occurred that affected Russia's foreign policy and gradually transformed Russia's indirect

resistance to the West and the U.S. into direct resistance. In Russia's military doctrines, the rhetoric of threat and danger to Russia and ways to counter it gradually expanded, which intensified with Putin's re-election in 2012. Therefore, Moscow deemed its strong presence and balancing act against the West in the Middle East necessary and does not tolerate attempts to exclude itself from this region. It should not be forgotten that Primakov, Russia's former foreign minister, emphasized that the Middle East has historically been within Russia's special interests (Malyshev, 2015, p. 113).

International affairs experts consider the first characteristic of the relationship between Russia and Syria to be its historical nature, which has always provided a suitable foundation for close cooperation between the two sides (Zargar, 2013, p. 60). By the early 1950s, Syria had become one of the most important Soviet partners in the Middle East. The good relations between the two countries during the Cold War were complemented by the establishment of the Latakia base by the Soviet Union and the development of various extensive political and military collaborations between the two countries. The change in the Soviet Union's political orientation in the mid-1980s, with the rise of Gorbachev, led to a distancing between the two countries, which continued for a while after the Soviet Union's collapse. However, with the resurgence of Eurasianism in Russia's foreign policy, Russia's relations with Syria were strengthened. In recent years, Moscow has been trying to keep Syria under its influence as a gateway to the Middle East and the Arab world (Sheikh-ol-Eslami and Beiki, 2013, p. 152).

According to realism theory, the structure of the international system became unipolar for a

short time after the Cold War, with the U.S. at its head. Washington acted unilaterally to maintain and expand its hegemony in global affairs, disrupting the balance of power in the international system. From Russia's perspective, U.S. policy has been to pressure and reduce Russia's regional and international influence. NATO's eastward expansion, the deployment of missile defense systems, the U.S. presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and U.S. policy in the Arab uprisings are all considered serious threats to Russia's national security. Therefore, Russia has implemented various balancing reactions against the West and the U.S. Russia views the Arab uprisings as a directed movement aligned with U.S. interests, which could negatively impact Russia's interests in the Middle East. From the Russian viewpoint, Westerners are attempting to achieve their goals by creating "controlled chaos" and using excuses like human rights. Sergey Lavrov believes that discussing the Arab world changes under the titles of the Arab Spring and democracy movements is nothing more than childish rhetoric (Trenin, 2013, p. 10). Russian elites are concerned that after Iraq, Libya, and Syria, it might be Russia's turn (Bagdonas, 2012, p. 69).

Without a doubt, the role of the Russian Federation in the Syrian crisis is worthy of examination and reflection from various angles. Moscow has tried to preserve Syria as its last gateway of influence in the Middle East and the Arab world and prevent it from falling into the hands of the West. In the current situation, a significant portion of Russia's geopolitical and strategic conflicts with the West, especially the U.S., in the Middle East, are linked to the Syrian crisis and its surrounding circumstances (Philips, 2012, p. 8). The developments in Arab countries compelled Russia to

resist the West. Moscow views such fundamental political changes as serving U.S. interests, potentially leading to the structural expansion of its influence in the Middle East. Putin has perceived the Arab uprisings as a manipulated movement by the West. In an article titled "Russia and the Changing World," he referred to the West's opportunism in the Arab developments and labeled U.S. interventionist policies in the Middle East as simplistic demagoguery (Nouri, 2012, p. 9).

### **Russia's Stance on the Syrian Crisis**

Since the onset of the Syrian crisis, Russia has been striving to support the ruling Syrian regime. The fall of the Syrian regime, for Russia—which monitors international issues with a realist approach—would mean losing the last stronghold among its key allies in the Middle East. Syria has been considered an ally of Russia during the Cold War and even afterward, so Russia is trying to prevent the influence of other powers in this country. Therefore, although Russia's presence in Syria apparently aims to protect the strategic interests of the ruling regime, on a broader level, it is essentially a support for its own strategic goals (Rogers and Reeva, 2015, p. 1). Overall, there are many reasons for Russia's particular focus on the Syrian crisis.

Firstly, Russia opposes the unipolar system. Moscow seeks to strengthen multilateralism in international strategic discourse because, in such an environment, there is more opportunity for Russia to play a significant role. From a realist perspective, the emergence of a more aggressive foreign policy in Russia is the result of structural pressures created by the international system (Bagheri Dolatabadi, 2014, p. 43). In reality, Russia's cooperative and sympathetic approach with the United States within the framework of combating terrorism after the September 11, 2001, incident did not

provide any advantage for Moscow; instead, it led to the limitation and restriction of its influence in various parts of the world, especially in its immediate neighborhood. Primakov believes that after September 11, nothing has changed in the international system except for an increase in American unilateralism (Ashrafi & Babazadeh, 2015, p. 53). Therefore, on an international level, Russia's presence in Syria helps to consolidate its position as a global power. Henry Kissinger states that Putin does not want the U.S. to unilaterally determine the course of developments in the region. Lavrov's statement that the future of the world will emerge based on how the new conditions in Syria take shape reflects the idea that Syria has taken on a reputational dimension for Russia. When this is tied to the shaping of future global power, and not just a geopolitical game, it demonstrates the value Damascus holds for Moscow (Ghorbani, 2013, p. 74).

Secondly, it relates to Russia's efforts to prevent a reduction of its influence in the Middle East. One of the approaches in Russia's new foreign policy era is to abandon the inferiority complex of the 1990s and restore Russia to a prominent position in international affairs. Russia wants to either expand its influence in the Middle East or at least maintain it at its current level. This influence is primarily manifested in Russia's relationship with Syria and Iran, and losing either of them would lead to the elimination of Russia's last remaining footprint in this geopolitical region (Bagdonas, 2012, p. 67).

Thirdly, Russia is concerned about the spread of Salafi Islam to its sphere of influence. The proximity of the Middle East to Russia's southern borders has led many to consider the Middle East as a vulnerable point for Russia's interests. Moscow is worried about the establishment of an extremist Islamic state in Syria,

and for various reasons, sees it as a threat to the stability of its Muslim-majority regions (Rostami, 2015, p. 109). First, some regions in Russia, such as Chechnya and Dagestan, are areas where Salafis hope to expand their influence. Second, some Russian nationals who have joined terrorist groups in Syria have long-standing hostilities with Moscow and harbor dreams of secession from the central government (Dehghani Firouzabadi & Moradi, 2015, p. 79).

Overall, Russia has adopted various strategies to manage the Syrian crisis. First, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council with veto power, Russia believes that the United Nations and the Security Council are sources of international power and central to establishing a stable international relations system. Russia has tried to use the UN as a tool to resolve the Syrian crisis in a way that serves its interests and prevents American unilateralism. The Russians viewed the Security Council's invocation of the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine in 2011 through the adoption of Resolution 1973 as a cover for the regime change strategy in Libya, and they have tried to avoid falling into the same trap again (Bajoria and McMahon, 2013, p.34). Overall, from the beginning of the Syrian crisis until mid-2017, Russia has vetoed Western, especially American, resolutions a total of 12 times. Moscow's steadfastness in the Security Council has demonstrated that the U.S. cannot act in the same way as it did in Libya. The evidence suggests that Russia is seeking a balance of power and strategic equilibrium with the U.S. in West Asia. The Russians, given their influence in Syria and in an effort to create a balance, try to take the initiative in negotiations for a political resolution of the crisis. Moscow has provided the necessary

conditions for holding various meetings. For example, Russia, with the help of Iran and the cooperation of Turkey, held the Astana peace talks in January 2017 (Ahmadi, 2018, p. 81).

### **Fields of Political Cooperation Between Iran and Russia in the Syrian Crisis**

Although it could be claimed that the Islamic Republic of Iran has been the closest Middle Eastern country to Russia over the past three decades, the cooperation between Iran and Russia only became significantly evident after the Syrian crisis. Following the emergence of the Syrian crisis, the aligned positions of Iran and Russia took on a new dimension, bringing them together in a common operational front in the Middle East for the first time. Moscow and Tehran, as two influential powers in regional dynamics, have provided considerable assistance to the ruling Syrian regime at the request of the legitimate Syrian government. Consequently, both countries reached the conclusion that direct cooperation in the Syrian crisis was necessary, leading to a mutual reliance on each other's policies. Realists believe that the structure of the international system is such that states must rely on themselves for survival, but, if necessary, they should form alliances to balance and overcome adversaries. From this perspective and on a global analytical level, what brought Iran and Russia to share common interests was their revisionist approach toward the existing order in the international system (Sadeghi, 2017, p. 231).

Although Russia is a global power and Iran a regional power, they both emphasize a multipolar world. On this basis, Russia and Iran, in the first instance, seek to create a level of balance of power in response to the increasing threats posed by the United States, countering its unilateralism and threats. In fact, the way



the U.S. has dealt with Russia and Iran has pushed them towards cooperation with each other. Therefore, preventing international pressures aimed at isolating Iran and Russia, gaining more maneuverability on the international stage, and preventing NATO's expansion are considered some of the most important shared issues in the foreign policies of the two countries (Karami, 2010, p. 122).

This situation led Russia and Iran to engage in close cooperation and make considerable efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis through various means. From 2011 to September 2015, Iran and its regional allies played a direct field role in defending the Syrian government, while Russia mainly provided political and diplomatic support. Moscow's expenses in Syria significantly increased when Russia began its military presence in September 2015 (Ahmadi, 2018, p. 78).

In fact, the Syrian crisis and the constructive role of the U.S. and its allies in shaping the crisis in this country significantly contributed to the closer ties and increased cooperation between Iran and Russia in various dimensions, especially in Syria. One of the factors considered a point of convergence between Iran and Russia in the Syrian conflict is the alignment of their interests. Both countries engaged in this conflict due to a combination of factors and contexts. In other words, Iran and Russia's involvement and actions in the Syrian conflict were dependent on one or more other threats or opportunities, with combating terrorism being one of these shared interests (Sotoudeh and Kiani, 2018, p. 168).

Under these circumstances, one of the most important reasons and contexts for Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict can be considered the fight against terrorists. The Russians, aiming to prevent terrorists fighting on Syrian soil from approaching Central Asia and their borders, took an active role in Syria

(Masoudi, 2013, p. 66). Although this goal was achieved with the relative end of ISIS's territorial control in Syria, the armed opposition forces based in northern Syria, including in Idlib province, such as "Tahrir al-Sham" and "Jaish al-Izza," which are multinational terrorists, many of whom migrated to Syria from Central Asia and the Caucasus, have repeatedly clashed with the Syrian army, which is supported by Russian airpower. Based on Iran's understanding of the threatening nature of terrorist groups, including ISIS, in Syria, combating them became a priority. In this context, the main objective of the terrorist groups based in Syria was perceived as threatening Iran's interests by approaching its borders and potentially entering the country, prompting Iran to send its advisory forces to Syria. Despite the Syrian regime's extended control over significant parts of the country, the issue of terrorism and the renaming of some of these groups to participate in Syria's political future remain, and this joint struggle could drive Tehran-Moscow relations in the post-conflict Syria (Hatami, 2016, pp. 42-141).

Iran and Russia agree on Bashar al-Assad's continued hold on power, at least at the time of writing this dissertation. Both countries, for various reasons, some of which were discussed in the previous section, view the current president as the best option for achieving their interests. However, there is a fundamental difference in the two countries' approaches to this issue, which could lead to some disputes. This point of difference is the reason for supporting Assad's continued hold on power, where Tehran and Moscow have differing views. In this context, the Islamic Republic of Iran's insistence on Assad's survival in power can be based on his supportive role in the "Axis of Resistance." In other words, Iran has a positive approach to Assad's presence in power and believes he should remain in power

at least until the political process is complete and the constitution is ratified, and then be allowed to run in the presidential elections. This is because Iran considers the active continuation of the Axis of Resistance dependent on Assad's hold on power (Simbar et al., 2017, p. 13).

In this view, removing Assad from the Syrian political system could seriously damage the role of the resistance forces in Iran's regional policies. On the other hand, Russia has a negative approach to the necessity of Assad's hold on power. Although the Russians, like Iran, consider Assad the best option for preserving their interests at the time of this dissertation's review, their reasoning—unlike Iran—is the fight against terrorism in Syria. As the Russian president emphasized at the beginning of the crisis, Moscow, more than insisting on Assad's survival in power, is focused on preserving the current Syrian system to prevent the potential dominance of certain extremist groups, like those under the "Muslim Brotherhood," in Syria and the spread of instability to Central Asia. Based on this, and considering the end of ISIS's control over Syria and the possible acceptance of some opposition groups by Russia to participate in political negotiations, this issue could become a point of contention between Iran and Russia. In this context, the set of field and political conditions in the Syrian conflict and the process of the Astana talks indicate that despite special cooperation in Syria, Iran and Russia have yet to reach a common agenda regarding Syria's future. In the context of Russia's lack of a clear and serious reaction to Israel's attacks on Syrian soil, Moscow's silence on Turkey's arming of the opposition in northern Syria, the failure to adhere to the demilitarized zone agreement by Ankara, Russia's relative adherence to Western

sanctions in the process of rebuilding Syria, Moscow's lack of insistence on Assad's presence in Syria's future political system, Russia's meetings with the U.S. and Israel in Jerusalem, Moscow's positions aligned with Turkey and against Iran in the trilateral meetings in Astana and Sochi, and several other issues could lead to a conflictual relationship between Tehran and Moscow and pose threats to Iran's interests in Syria. Therefore, the Syrian crisis has created a dual and even fragile situation between Iran and Russia (Parker, 2019, p. 36).

However, the intensification of the Ukraine war and its protracted nature for Russia, along with Moscow's various political and military needs from Tehran, has somewhat improved this fragile and dual situation.

### Conclusion

Iran and Russia have experienced a long history of competition and cooperation, war and strategic alliances, with the Syrian crisis being the pinnacle of their interactions. Although the presence of long-term political-economic interests and a common enemy in Syria has led to operational cooperation between the two countries at a strategic alliance level—successfully resulting in the stabilization of the Syrian government and securing the interests of both nations—the strategic alliance between Iran and Russia in Syria, and even in global policy, has been influenced by historical perceptions governing the relations between the two countries, especially in the minds of some Iranian and Russian elites. This poses a significant challenge in transitioning to a strategic alliance in international politics. Accordingly, the findings of this research confirm the existence of a strategic alliance rather than a strategic union between Iran and

Russia. Although the formation of the Ukraine war and Russia's need for Iran's support in various dimensions have strengthened this strategic alliance, relying on the theory of realism and the movement of political units based on their interests, there is a possibility that Russia, which has a history of numerous exchanges at the international level, might engage in a deal over Syria based on its interests. This could have political and security implications for the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Iranian policy-makers should have short-term and long-term plans and strategies in this regard.

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