The Military & Security Cooperation between Iran and Russia in the Syrian Crisis with the Approach of Realism 2010-2017

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Abstract:

Iran, one of the powerful players in West Asia, from the beginning of the crisis in Syria, always tried to sensitively take a completely different position from other regional players in supporting the political system of Syria, as one of the important priorities in foreign policy. , follow his military and security. Iran's positions in the Syrian crisis were based on the overlap of the national security interests of this country and the Syrian nation-state, because the victory of fundamentalist Salafist groups in Syria could be the biggest security threat to the axis of resistance, Iran's national interests, and Shia geopolitics in the long run. The region should include Shamat and Iraq. These conditions also existed for Russia, which envisions its own interests in the region of West Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean. Due to its energy resources and geopolitical location, this region is considered an influential and unforgivable area for actors like Russia. By presenting ISIS as a security concern, Tehran and Moscow succeeded in limiting the American effort to have a serious presence in Syria through close cooperation in addition to eliminating the threat of ISIS. In this article, an attempt was made to answer this question by relying on the theory of realism, how the crisis in Syria has affected the relations between Iran and Russia between 2010 and 2017 by emphasizing military-security cooperation.

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Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran, as one of the powerful actors in West Asia, has always sought, from the onset of the crisis in Syria, to support the Syrian political system with sensitivity, adopting a stance completely different from other emerging regional players. This support for the Syrian regime has been pursued as one of the important priorities in Iran's foreign, military, and security policies. The prevailing perception in political, security, and military studies is that Iran's supportive stance towards the Syrian regime and efforts to establish security and quickly resolve the crisis in this country are driven by an ideology based on idealistic goals. However, by closely examining recent regional developments, the Syrian crisis, and the nature of Iran's supportive stance towards the Syrian regime, it becomes clear that this perception is entirely far from reality. Iran's stance on the Syrian crisis is based on a realist approach and the overlap of the national security interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Syrian state-nation. The victory of fundamentalist Salafi groups in Syria and the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in the region could pose the greatest long-term security threat to the Islamic resistance axis, Iran's national interests, and the Shia geopolitics of the region, including the Levant and Iraq.

These conditions are also true for Russia, as one of the extra-regional powers envisioning its interests in West Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean. This region, due to its energy resources and geopolitical position, is considered an influential and indispensable area for players like Russia. Before the popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, Russia was increasing its ties with these countries, aiming to expand its influence in the region,

thereby reducing U.S. influence in the Middle Eastern countries. In other words, by being present in this region, Russia sought to challenge U.S. interests and policies and divert U.S. attention from Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Baltics, Eastern Europe, and particularly Ukraine. With the start of uprisings and political developments in the region, Russia's policy in these areas, considering existing political goals, varied from one country to another. Russia's military intervention in the Syrian crisis, following the West's failure to end the Syrian crisis with the precondition of Bashar al-Assad's removal from power, created a new situation in the region.

Moscow, by presenting ISIS as a security concern, claimed that it was showing its true behavior. However, Russia, under the guise of being anti-ISIS, is pursuing larger strategic objectives. Russia seeks to maintain the Syrian regime and reduce the influence of the U.S. and its regional allies who support the Syrian government's opponents. The main goal for Russia is to preserve the Assad regime in Damascus, which enables it to solidify its foothold in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean simultaneously and to maintain its influence through military and security cooperation with Iran in the region.

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.

Rafiei 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.

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.

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.

Vafaifard 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.

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.

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.

Theoretical Framework

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. (Anousheh, 2001, p. 615)

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)

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.

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)

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. (Gholamhosseini & Khajeh, 2013, p. 109)

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)

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)

Realism is one of the oldest perspectives in the field of explaining and interpreting international issues, and it still holds a significant and appropriate position among other existing approaches (Abdollahkhani, 2004, p. 59). This ideology is one of the few perspectives in which the issue of security forms its central and main foundation. Realists in the field of security focus on issues such as "international security," "insecurity," "survival," "security issues based on military concerns," "self-reliance in achieving security," and "state-centrism in security reference" (American policymakers, especially after the events of September 11, have emphasized exactly these issues, and under these pretexts and with the aim of combating al-Qaeda and establishing international security, they launched military attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq. Currently, they also appear to be attempting to establish security in Syria through military intervention). Realists say that insecurity is a prominent feature of the international system and constantly exists as a normal standard. They believe that distrust among countries is a given in an anarchic system (Abdollahkhani, 2010, pp. 61-68). Mearsheimer, in this regard, says: "It is possible that perpetual war is not a constant feature of the international system, but there will always be a ruthless security competition in which war, just like rain, is always likely to happen" (Mearsheimer, 1990, p. 52).

Military-Security Cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia in the West Asia Region

With Putin's assumption of leadership in Russian policies since 2000, Russia's determination to establish an independent foreign policy with global dimensions became more serious than ever. This approach gained significant momentum after the events of September 11, 2001, and especially following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, as Russia sought to establish itself as a significant player in global and regional politics, a fact evident in Russia's stances towards the developments during the

uprisings, particularly the Syrian crisis. In general, the developments in the Islamic countries of the Middle East region, especially in Syria, hold strategic importance for Russia for several reasons, the most important of which include:

- The threat to Russia's economic and commercial interests due to Middle East developments;
- Russia's naval military base on the western coast of Syria in the port of Tartus;
- The geopolitical proximity of the Middle East to Russia;
- The identity (religious) connection between the Middle East and the Muslims of Russia and the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus;
- The potential for Western countries' interference;

Since September 2015, when Putin officially intervened in the Syrian crisis under the pretext of combating terrorism, Iran has been his main ally in this path; both nations faced a common threat in the form of terrorism and a regional rival in the form of the United States. These factors led Iran and Russia to experience unprecedented cooperation in the developments of West Asia (Margelov, 2013, p. 7). The increase in Iran's role in West Asia, which was among the outcomes of the Arab Spring, reshaped the relations among the active countries in the region's political sphere and made the closeness between Iran and Russia inevitable. In fact, Russia, after the unrest in Syria and the start of the war in Libya, felt that it was losing its foothold in the region completely, and it was only Iran that could serve as a conduit for Moscow's return to regional equations (Borshchevskaya, 2016, p. 17).

The issue of Syria, for the first time, placed Iran and Russia operationally on the same front in West Asia. Despite the fact that during this period, Iran has tried not to become Russia's ground forces and Russia has tried not to act as Iran's air force, the two countries have so far been able, through the division of responsibilities, to prevent the opponents of the Assad government from achieving their goals in Syria (Shouri, 2015, 14).

In general, the nature of Iran and Russia's activities concerning the Syrian developments can be summarized in the statement that Moscow and Tehran seek to nullify the U.S. plan in the region, change the political and military face of the world, and present a new equation in which the balance of power is shaped according to the new international landscape (Nejat, 2017, p. 48). Iran believes that if the Syrian regime is to change, it would lose its strategic ally in Western Asia. In other words, a change of power in Syria would mean adding another link to the chain of Iran's regional rivals and losing a strategic regional ally (Nejat & Jafari Valadani, 2013, p. 44). This issue could play a decisive role in strengthening the position of the Zionist regime, weakening the resistance front, and shifting the balance of power in favor of the United States and to the detriment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is undoubtedly the foremost regional power in the Middle East and the most significant challenger to the United States in the region (Niakooyi & Behmanesh, 2015, p. 129). The West's goal in toppling the Assad government is, on a global scale, to expand its hegemony against the remnants of the Eastern Bloc and, on a regional scale, to counter the growing geopolitical influence of Iran (Ashrafi & Babazadeh, 2015, p. 46). The most important factors contributing to the strengthening of Iran-Russia cooperation in West Asia include Iran's high capacity for action in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, and the Arab Spring, which brought to power governments inclined towards the West, conflicting with the interests of Russia and Iran (Osouli & Rasouli,

2013, p. 87). The commonalities between Iran and Russia's policies regarding Syrian developments can be summarized as follows:

From Iran's perspective, Syria is the frontline against the expansionism of the Zionist regime, and if a Western-aligned government comes to power in Syria, it will not be beneficial for Iran and the resistance front. From Russia's perspective, the aspect that no Western intervention should lead to a pro-American government coming to power in Damascus aligns with Iran's view; however, Russia has a different view regarding the anti-Zionist aspect and supporting the resistance. Both Iran and Russia support reforms in Syria's current political system aimed at broadening the role of the Syrian people in determining their future. Russia and Iran strongly oppose other countries' interference in arming Assad's opposition. Russia and Iran support the United Nations plan but are also concerned about the actions of the peacekeeping forces and the infiltrative tendencies among them. Russia and Iran are against the rise to power of radical Wahhabi Islamic groups closely linked to Saudi Arabia (Mohseni et al., 2015, p. 13).

However, Moscow and Tehran face common threats and have the means to address them, and if their national interests align, this issue could lead the two countries towards strategic cooperation. The leaders of Russia and Iran believe that preserving Assad's government will only be possible by unifying efforts and temporarily setting aside the second aspect of the issue, which is their differences. Consequently, a beneficial collaboration has been formed between the two countries, where, despite interaction, each party pursues its own goals (Kozhanov, 2015, p. 3).

The foundation of the Iran-Russia coalition is the preservation of the existing political system in Syria and the eradication of ISIS, and as long as this common interest persists, the coalition will also continue. On the other hand, if either country's policy towards these two issues changes, or if Syria's civil war is resolved in favor of the country's political system, the coalition will collapse (Karami, 2017, p. 3).

In summary, considering the above equations, it can be said: first, the nature of Iran-Russia relations is changing, and both sides are aware of the importance of developing a strategic relationship to secure their shared geopolitical and security interests and have taken serious steps in this regard. Second, this change in relations is at the beginning of its path and needs to be institutionalized. Third, this new development is an opportunity for Iran as it increases its geopolitical importance in the eyes of the West and its regional allies. Fourth, and most importantly, Iran must use this opportunity to strengthen its independent role and create a balance in regional relations and global equations (Barzegar, 2015, p. 3).

Although Moscow has shown that it considers Iran's interests and, in practice, due to its need for Tehran, it has not been and cannot be indifferent to these interests, naturally, in its grand and regional designs, Russia's specific interests take precedence over Tehran's interests (Nouri, 2017, p. 3).

The Position of Syria in the Security-Military Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Since the formation of the Syrian crisis, various actors at the domestic, regional, and international levels have been playing roles and influencing the situation in line with their national goals and interests. The Islamic Republic of Iran is considered one of the key players

in the Syrian crisis and the most powerful regional supporter of Syria. It can be boldly stated that Iran's support for Syria so far has enabled Bashar al-Assad's government to withstand the comprehensive pressures from the West, many Arab countries, and also Turkey (Nejat & Jafari Valadani, 2013, p. 39).

The fall of the ruling regime in Syria, in any manner, besides losing a strategic ally and breaking the Shia Crescent, would disrupt the current balance of power for Iran and shape regional equations in favor of Saudi Arabia and its regional and international allies. Therefore, alongside strengthening the position of the Syrian government to prevent this undesirable event, Iran seeks to establish close relations with the newly revolutionized countries, aiming to achieve spiritual influence to gain power in the region (Sharifian et al., 2012, p. 176), in such a way that it can export its governmental model to the transformative countries in the region. Limiting the influence of the United States and the West in general in the region and preventing the rise of a government under their influence in a country that is an ally of Iran is one of Iran's most significant concerns regarding Syria. For this reason, Iran accepts any transfer of power in Syria only if it has a role in it and ensures its future presence in the country (Nejat and Jafari Valadani, 2013, p. 135), thereby helping to prevent the collapse of the Islamic resistance axis and contribute to establishing a favorable order for the Islamic Republic and its allied actors in the region. In a May 2017 meeting, Donald Trump signed the world's largest arms deal with Saudi Arabia. The value of this deal, which has so far been unprecedented in the history of global arms deals, is estimated at 110 billion dollars (Kayhan Newspaper, 2017, p. 4).

The signing of these agreements coinciding with Donald Trump's first foreign trip to Saudi Arabia indicates the priority of commercial and economic issues for the Trump administration. The anti-Iran rhetoric of the Saudi king and Donald Trump in official meetings in Saudi Arabia reflects the continuation of the longstanding policies of the U.S. government in the Middle East region, opposing the Islamic Republic of Iran and favoring Riyadh. On the other hand, this agreement will increase Saudi Arabia's defense capability to over 300 billion dollars over 10 years, with the main objective being to boost Saudi Arabia's defense power against Iran's regional influence. This fact also encompasses regional issues, particularly the crises in Syria and Yemen, which can further complicate the crisis in these countries (Mir-Hosseini, 2017, p. 5).

One of Iran's priorities regarding Syria since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution in Iran has been regional power balance. During the Syrian crisis, Iran's regional rivals in the Middle East, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, were dissatisfied with the status quo and sought to change the regional power balance. In fact, the alliance of these actors regarding Syria aimed to weaken the opposing alliance. These actors attempted to sever Syria, as one of Iran's key allies in the region and a bridge to Hezbollah and Hamas resistance groups, from Iran, thereby shifting the regional balance in their favor (Nejat, 2014, p. 74) and diminishing the determining role of the Islamic Republic in regional equations, paving the way for its weakening and isolation on a regional scale.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia lacks the military capacity for direct intervention in Syria. Therefore, it used its oil wealth to militarily equip Syrian rebels to ensure that if Assad fell, his replacement would be a Sunni government with friendly relations with them (Giokaris, 2013, p. 2). Accordingly, for the first time in June 2012, the first Saudi arms shipment

reached Syrian opposition forces at the Turkish-Syrian border (Phillips, 2015, p. 4). Saudi Arabia, by supporting Assad's opponents and in connection with its regional and extra-regional allies, employed its efforts to overthrow Bashar Assad. This was intended to reduce the power of the resistance axis, minimize Iran's role and influence in the region, reduce its capacity to shape regional equations and order, and extend its influence near Iran's border and at the heart of the resistance axis. Many analysts believe that Syria came under comprehensive pressure when the moderate axis realized that Iran's path passes through Syria (Cathail, 2011, p. 12), meaning that one of the main objectives of opposing the current Syrian government is to prevent the spread of the Islamic Republic's regional ideological influence and to contain Shia Iran. During the crisis, Iran provided comprehensive support to its strategic ally (Syria). Iran's aid to the Syrian government included the following: 1- Oil and financial assistance 2- Intelligence support and backing 3- Military aid and provision of military equipment 4- Sending experts and technical officers to Syria to train its army forces 5- Forming and training militias such as the National Defense Forces (NDF) according to its military defense strategy in Syria. Iran's leader views Syria's internal conflicts as a black-and-white issue. Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's leader, believes: "The Syrian regime is a significant part of the resistance axis against Israel and the front line of Iran's struggle with America." Some Iranian officials have expressed doubt about Tehran's unlimited support for the Assad regime, but it seems that the Islamic Republic of Iran has adopted comprehensive support (Hashemi Sana, 2016, p. 5). This move was able to prevent Syria's collapse, which is the connecting link of the

resistance axis, thereby thwarting Western plans and scenarios and their regional allies from breaking the resistance axis in the region, which in turn can help ensure and secure the interests and goals of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its allies in the region. Iran and its allies increasingly view the situation in Syria as a zero-sum game; the fear of the Ba'ath Party's removal could pave the way for the emergence of a new regime in Damascus that is hostile to Tehran. Consequently, Iran's leadership made a strategic decision to fully support Assad by providing weapons, oil, and financial aid. Another significant issue, not unrelated to Syria, is the potential for escalating confrontation between Israel and Iran on the Syrian front. Tel Aviv officials have repeatedly warned of the possibility of Iran establishing a new military base in Syria and emphasized that they would not allow Syria to be used as a base for Iran. This issue could potentially increase regional tensions and trigger a new era of regional hostility and tension as regional and extra-regional powers compete to fill the current voids and establish their presence in unstable areas (Masoud Nia, 2018, p. 137).

Syria's Position in Russia's Security-Military Policy

Since the Cold War, Russia has had extensive military relations with Syria; many of the military technologies available in Syria are Russian. During that period, the best relations were established with Syria, and Russia succeeded in obtaining the concession to establish a military base in the port of Tartus from Syria. This base is still under Russia's control and is considered one of the few points of direct Russian military presence in the eastern Mediterranean. Therefore, recent developments in Syria have provided a suitable

ground for strengthening military relations between Russia and Syria.

Military intervention in Syria was one of Russia's strategies, which this country initially was not willing to use, but this military intervention demonstrated that Russia is ready to act to counter American hegemony and to shape a power balance and counter threats to Russian national interests and security. Russia delivered the S-300 defense system to the Syrian government in 2012. In August 2015, Bashar Assad announced that the government was unable to control all areas of the country and requested more help from its allies. Less than 13 percent of the 300,000-strong Syrian army remained before the war. The government controlled only about 17 percent of the country. On August 26, 2015, an agreement was signed between Russia and Syria, under which Moscow committed to providing military support to Syria. In line with military assistance to the Syrian regime, Russia initiated airstrikes on the opposition's headquarters starting on September 30, 2015, adding a new dimension to its support. Russia's military action, its first in West Asia since 1989, signaled the emergence of a new "great game" in the region, aimed at maintaining and strengthening Moscow's relative position in the international order. By intervening militarily in Syria, Moscow sought to send a strong message to the world that it is ready to respond to any threat (Darayandeh, 2019, p. 12).

On the surface, Russia's intervention in Syria indeed supported Iran's policy of preserving Shia elements in Syria; however, a deeper look at this issue reveals that Russia's goal is not necessarily the indefinite retention of the Assad regime in Syria. This is a classic maneuver aimed at balancing power to counter the threat posed by Sunni terrorists from Russia's southern borders. Russia seeks to emerge as a new player in the balance of power in the West Asia region. It appears that selling better defense systems to Turkey and Saudi Arabia (S-400) than to Iran (S-300) aligns with this country's efforts to influence the region. Henry Kissinger says: "Peace can only be achieved through hegemony or balance of power"; in other words, powers that cannot practice hegemony try to maintain balance. Currently, Russia cannot replace American hegemony in the West Asia region, so it is striving to maintain balance in the region (Taghavinia, 2017, p. 3). Russia does not support the emergence of a dominant power (hegemon) in the Middle East, as such a power could challenge Russian interests in West Asia. Therefore, Russia's policy in this region is not to strengthen one actor against another, but to maintain balance in relations with regional countries and between different actors so that none of them can achieve a superior position (Shapouri, 2017, p. 3).

Military-Security Cooperation between Iran and Russia in the Syrian Crisis

The most important factors contributing to the expansion of convergence between Iran and Russia, particularly in the military and security domain in the West Asia region, especially in the Syrian crisis, involve issues that present challenges for both countries. In this context, the key elements of extremism and terrorism and their impact on Iran-Russia security cooperation, considering the Syrian crisis (regional threats), and the Syrian crisis as a threat to the interests of Iran and Russia (external threats), have strengthened military and security cooperation between Iran and Russia from 2010 to 2017.

Extremism, Terrorism, and Their Impact on Iran-Russia Security Cooperation Considering the Syrian Crisis: After the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and

Washington, Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism became prominent topics in Western media, political, and academic discussions, as well as in the post-communist Eurasia. With the onset of the Syrian crisis, Western powers and their regional allies took steps to fuel the conflict in this country by guiding and equipping terrorist groups under the pretext of supporting Assad's opposition. Meanwhile, the share of Eurasian countries in sending terrorists to Syria was also significant. Although the number of potential ISIS members from the Caucasus region is not very high, what makes ISIS dangerous is its ideology, which crosses borders and spreads in the war-torn and distressed Caucasus environment, fostering public discontent with the Russian government. On the other hand, although the North Caucasus is not directly connected to Iran, the emergence and spread of radical and extremist ideologies, especially of the Salafi, Wahhabi, and ISIS types, could threaten Iran's national security (Hosseini, 2015, p. 3).

An important point to consider is that the Syrian crisis has given rise to a form of international terrorism. These international and organized terrorists might head to their home countries or other regions after Syria and cause turmoil there as well. Such a situation has become a potential threat to Russia and the Central Asian and Caucasus countries and has also increased Russia's cooperation with Iran, particularly in the security domain. Russia, due to its geographical proximity between some of its southern regions and the Middle East, is concerned about the growth of extremist Islamism and the spread of unrest from the Middle East to the Eurasian region (Sohrabi, 2014, p. 139).

Although there are no precise and reliable statistics on the number of Central Asian and Caucasus nationals and youths who have joined terrorist and extremist Takfiri organizations like ISIS and al-Nusra in Iraq and Syria, it is undeniable that hundreds or even thousands of people from each of the Central Asian and Caucasus republics, as well as from the southern and northern Caucasus, are part of these organizations. Initially, over 90% of ISIS and al-Nusra members were of Arab origin, but today, according to some field reports from informed sources, 50% of the members and 60% of the commanders of these groups are non-Arabs. Among the non-Arab members and commanders of these terrorist organizations, 80% are nationals of Central Asian and Caucasus republics (Mir Mohammadi, 2015, p. 3).

Thus, Russia prefers to fight terrorism far from its borders rather than face such conflicts within its own territory. It strives to combat international terrorist groups that have originated and taken root in the Syrian crisis, wherever possible, in alliance with its partners. Therefore, Russia's military presence in Syria, despite the numerous risks involved, reflects the fear that Russians feel about their vital interests. Preventing the spread of extremist ideologies within the country, given the significant Muslim population living in Russia, is seen as the most critical factor threatening the country's interests. The Russians believe that maintaining current friendly relations with Iran and implementing them practically at a realistic level in the 21st century is among Russia's interests. Hence, two factors have made Iran strategically important in Russia's foreign policy: (a) Iran's effective performance in fighting terrorism and extremism, particularly in Syria, and (b) the United States' instrumental use of extremist Islamist groups (Nouri, 2016, p. 3).

In general, several key factors have led Russia to view Iran as its ally in combating terrorism. First, Iran has played a crucial role in combating terrorism, a role that is considered very important in Russia's policy. Second, despite Iran's Islamic government model, the country has never sought to promote Islamism like Saudi Arabia, and Iran's Shia Islamic interpretation is very democratic, moderate, and peace-oriented. Third, Iran's efforts in two strategic regions, West Asia and Central Asia, have compelled Russia to recognize Iran as an effective regional power. Fourth, Iran's moderate Islamic model can serve as a counterbalance to Saudi Arabia's extremist Islamism in the region. Therefore, these factors have brought Iran and Russia closer and elevated Iran's status in Russia's Middle East policy.

The Syrian Crisis as a Threat to the Interests of Iran and Russia: After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States sought to maintain its role as a key player in Iran-Russia relations. Since 1994, U.S. policy has focused on simultaneously controlling Russia and Iran. Currently, it seems that a diverse array of shared and conflicting interests has intertwined Iran-Russia relations with those of the United States. In this context, Russia views Iran as an anti-hegemonic actor that can play an important role in challenging U.S. interests in the Middle East. Consequently, the conflict of interests between Russia and the U.S., along with Iran's adversarial stance towards the U.S., has improved Iran's position in Russia's foreign policy. At the same time, the U.S. has contributed to Iran-Russia convergence in at least two ways. First, both the Islamic Republic of Iran and Russia are dissatisfied with the current state of the international system led by hegemonic U.S. leadership on a global level. Second, both countries do not have a favorable view of U.S. influence in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the West. Specifically, one of the key objectives of Iran-Russia cooperation in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and West Asia is to counter U.S. policies in these regions. As an anti-hegemonic actor, Iran not only hinders Western influence in the southern belt of Russia's borders but also plays a significant role in achieving "Russia's strategic deterrence" in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, against the West and its regional allies (Nouri, 2016, p. 3).

In this context, the Syrian crisis is one of the most important examples of the joint Iran-Russia policy against U.S. movements. This crisis, given the role the U.S. has played in it, prompted Iran and Russia for the first time to engage in joint military and security cooperation in West Asia. The U.S. opposition to Iran and Russia's interests, particularly in West Asia, paved the way for Tehran and Moscow to cooperate, especially in the military and security domains. Both countries are aware that the emergence and strengthening of terrorist groups under U.S. support in the region are linked to the geopolitical interests of their regional and extraregional rivals. Therefore, the growth of Salafi and terrorist groups in West Asia, especially in Syria, has been a serious concern for both countries in recent years. The presence of ISIS and other terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq could pose significant border and territorial threats to Iran in the long term. The radicalization of the region through the Sunni-Shia divide, border threats, jeopardizing territorial integrity, terrorist operations, weakening the resistance front in the region, creating a safe zone for Israel, and the presence of extraregional powers in the Middle East are some of the threats posed by the emergence of ISIS to Iran (Zolfaghari & Omrani, 2017, p. 169). For instance, the 2017 ISIS terrorist attack on Iran's parliament and the shrine of its former leader can be cited. Russia,

for various reasons, also expressed concern about the growth of Takfiri terrorist groups in Syria. First, some areas in southern Russia, including Chechnya and Dagestan, are regions where Salafis hope to expand their influence. Second, a group of Russian nationals in these areas joined terrorist groups in Syria. These individuals have a longstanding hostility towards Moscow and aspire to secede from the central government. As a result, combating terrorism and the threat of extremism in Syria has been one of the areas of cooperation between Tehran and Moscow, with the two countries showing an increasing level of political and security cooperation to counter this common threat. In September 2014, Lavrov called Iran Russia's natural ally in the fight against extremists in West Asia. In this context, Iran and Russia formed a relatively effective team in Syria, complementing each other's efforts and supporting the Syrian regime. Both countries strongly opposed the interventions of other countries in arming the Syrian opposition and the direct military intervention of powers, especially the U.S., in Syria (Osouli & Rasuli, 2013, p. 89).

Iran, through its Quds Force, and Russia, through its air force and long-range missiles, coordinated to support Syria. Iran provided financial assistance, weapons, and most importantly, manpower, while Russia provided air support to operationalize Iran's military movements on the battlefield. This cooperation led to the first-ever missile strikes by Russia from warships in the Caspian Sea, passing through Iranian airspace to hit targets in Syria. In 2016, Russian bombers, including long-range TU-22-3M and tactical SU-34 bombers, bombed targets in Syria from the Nojeh Air Base in Hamedan. This was the first time since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 that a major power conducted military operations from Iranian soil. It was also the first time since World War II that Iran allowed a foreign power to use its military bases for military operations.

Conclusion

The presence of shared security threats such as extremism and terrorism, particularly in the West Asia region, is considered one of the factors that have expanded cooperation between Tehran and Moscow. From this perspective, extremist and terrorist groups, as well as their regional and international supporters, can be viewed as driving factors in improving Iran's position in Russia's foreign policy. On one hand, the existence of terrorist threats and, on the other, the role Iran plays in eliminating these threats in the region, have led Russia to form an alliance with Iran and to establish extensive political, military, and security cooperation between the two countries.

Iran and Russia are dissatisfied with the continuation of the current situation in the international system, where the United States claims hegemonic leadership on a global level. Moreover, Iran and Russia each, in their way, claim hegemony over their surrounding regions, which puts them in conflict and contradiction with the global hegemony of the United States. Therefore, the presence of the U.S. in the regions surrounding Iran and Russia, and the jeopardizing of the political and security interests of both countries, can create a common stance for Tehran and Moscow, which is a confrontation with the U.S. over the determination of spheres of influence. Generally, realists consider shared interests as the starting point of their analysis of the formation of the Iran-Russia alliance on Middle Eastern issues and believe that the shared interests

among states, which include countering threats, lead to the formation of alliances, and with the weakening or elimination of these shared interests, the alliances also weaken or dissolve. In other words, alliances are temporary phenomena.

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