

# **Iran and Russia's great power Role (with emphasis on the Syrian crisis)**

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## **Abstract**

Russia's involvement in the Syrian crisis has changed from a limited action to a fundamental strategy. Russia, which was ousted from the club of great powers after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was looking for an opportunity to return. Restoring the position of "great power" is Putin's main idea based on the identity and historical foundations of the Russians. In this regard, the Syrian crisis has been a turning point in the process of reviving the position of Russia's great power. Accordingly, the main question of the article is: "What role has Iran played in restoring Russia's great power position, especially in the Syrian crisis?" The hypothesis is formulated as follows: "During the Syrian crisis, Russia has used a hedging strategy in the Middle East. Russia's special relationship with Iran in the Syrian crisis has been Russia's relative advantage, which has played a significant role in restoring Russia's status as a great power. Russia implemented a hedging strategy with a holistic alliance". The data of this article are collected from new and comprehensive sources and processed in a descriptive-analytical method.

**Keywords:** Iran, Hedging Strategy, Holistic Alliance, Russia, Great Power, Syria.

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## **Introduction**

The Middle East has many features, including energy resources and strategic situation, that has always attracted the attention of transnational activists. One of the lesser-known features is the region's position in the rise and fall of great world powers. Most likely, if Britain had not used the comparative advantage of oil against other rivals, it would have not reached the Pax position at some point in world history. Under George H. W. Bush, the United States sought to replace the New World Order with the Cold War international system through the massive and unbalanced invasion of Iraq. Despite benefiting from its oil reserves, the United States continues to seek to contain other rival powers by managing the Middle East's energy resources. In recent years, Russia has also turned to this strategic region to restore its traditional position among great world powers. Russia has turned the Syrian crisis into an opportunity to return to the club of great world powers. Accordingly, the main question of the article is: "What position has Iran occupied in restoring Russia's great power position, especially in the Syrian crisis?" The hypothesis of the article is

formulated as follows: "During the Syrian crisis, Russia has used a hedging strategy in the Middle East. Russia's special relationship with Iran in the Syrian crisis has been Russia's relative advantage, which has played a significant role in restoring Russia's status as a great power. Russia implemented a hedging strategy with a holistic alliance". The data of this article are collected from new and comprehensive sources and processed in a descriptive-analytical method.

### **Conceptual Framework:**

Le Hong Hiep defines hedging as a strategy enabling states to handle uncertainties in the counterpart's future actions through relying on a "basket of policy tools" which on the one hand helps to promote bilateral cooperation, and on the other hand comprises elements of competition aimed at preparing themselves against potential security threats posed by their partners (Hiep 2013, 337). Hedging strategy is composed of the following elements: A. Economic pragmatism: intensifying bilateral economic cooperation seeking to facilitate domestic development; B. Direct engagement: expanding different bilateral mechanisms in order to construct mutual trust and encourage cooperation, thereby shaping China's behavior; C. Hard balancing: seeking military modernization discouraging China from aggressive actions; and D. Soft balancing: stimulating participation in multilateral institutions as well as developing relations with major partners to counter excessive pressure from China (Hiep 2013, 344). The hedging strategy was first used to analyze the foreign policy of small countries, but it is a suitable analytical tool to analyze the foreign policy of major powers. Some researchers present the strategic hedging framework as a way to trace the determinants of the foreign policies of great powers. For example, they use the case of the Chinese energy security strategy in the Middle East as an

illustrative case study (Salman and Geeraerts: 2013 / Tessman, Brock, and Wolfe: 2011).

Russia implemented a hedging strategy with a holistic alliance. "Alliance and Coalition", which is one of the main orientations of countries toward the international system, has changed a lot in recent years. Scholars have seriously considered the diversity of international alliances and coalitions throughout the 21st century. Some have conceptualized the mechanism of forming multilateral military alliances as Buying Allies, in which the Pivotal States are in focus (Henke: 2019: 128-162). To explain the alliances in the Middle East theoretically, another concept has been proposed in this regard. Whereas traditionally alliances and coalitions were formed between countries and against other countries, today a newer type of alliance is formed against internal threats to a country which is called "internal threat alliances" (Quirk: 2017).

Another type of alliance that has formed during the Syrian crisis in Russia is the "holistic alliance", which has many similarities to these alliances and is based on their foundation even. Most alliances and coalitions that are formed in the Middle East are based on the principle of hostility and consist of several countries against another country or countries. A holistic alliance is a kind of alliance that is not created directly against any particular country and does not cause polarization in the region. The threat that drives the formation of a holistic alliance is not from one country but is within a political unit and is, to varying degrees, dangerous for the countries participating in the alliance. At the same time, this type of threat is not an existential threat for the mentioned countries and is more an introduction to the formation of power relations in the region in the future. Various actors feel threatened and try to steer the process in their own favor. In a holistic alliance, an actor who has good relations with other actors tries to manage the crisis

through synergy, thereby promoting his position in the world power equations (Abol Fadal, 2019: 25-36). Holistic alliances are not ideological and one-dimensional; however, they cover various areas of economics, energy, and the fight against terrorism. (Abol Fadal, 2019: 3).

### **I-Russia as a Great Power**

In the light of the Syrian crisis, Russia is trying to restore its historic position among great powers. There is no consensus on what a great power is and which country is a great power. The concept of "great power", in the discussion of world politics and government, has a very wide and ambiguous scope and there is no single definition for it. But empirically, a relatively changing position can be determined for it. (Volgy et al., 2011: 3). Over the past few decades, the issue of great power has come to the attention of various theorists, each proposing a set of indicators for it. Levy describes great power as the range of cross-border relations in foreign policy, major capabilities, the level of regional and international activities, and the recognition by other independent states. According to Levy, a state is a great power if it: (a) has unusual capabilities to pursue its interests in interstate relations; (b) uses those capabilities to pursue unusually broad and expansive foreign policies beyond its immediate neighborhood or region, and (c) seeks to influence the course of international affairs relatively independently of other major powers. Such foreign policy behavior now enables that state to be recognized in international relations by policymakers of other states within the international community as a state with a trans-regional level of action, which can influence international affairs, and this can define it as a country with great power. (Volgy et al., 2011: 6).

According to the criteria proposed by the above theorists, Russia enjoyed the status of great power from the establishment

of the Tsarist Empire until the collapse of the Soviet Union (Neumann, 2008: 29). Although Russia still had some components of great power after the collapse of the Soviet Union, such as area, veto power, and nuclear weapons, it did not have other components, especially the desire to play a global role. Russia defined itself below the Western world during the hegemonic period of Atlantic discourse. This discourse is deeply rooted in Russia and is one of the three main schools<sup>1</sup> of Russian foreign policy dating back to the tsarist empire and the belief that the leadership and the royal family in Russia were an integral part of European families (Tsygankov, 2010: 4). Contrary to liberals such as Yeltsin's Foreign Minister Kozyrev, the West turned the collapse of the Soviet Union into a historic opportunity to avenge half a century of Soviet struggle and humiliate the Russians. The first half of the 1990s not only did not allow Russia to join the Western powers but severely humiliated it. Under such circumstances, while the old Russian communists could not restore Soviet greatness, the process of restoring Russia as a great power began in the second half of the 1990s. Incidentally, Yevgeny Primakov, with Eurasian discourse, and by closeness to the Middle East, wanted Russia to return to its place. Of course, the damage Russia suffered by the collapse of the Soviet Union, which Putin called the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century, did not allow Russia to return to the club of great powers in the short term. After several color revolutions outside and near Russia, Putin strongly criticized US unilateralism and emphasized Russia's great power during a speech at the Munich Security Conference (Tsygankov, 2010, 171). The nostalgia for the Tsarist and Soviet periods and the grief of losing these periods has become part of Russia's strategic culture, which exists in the

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1 - Westernism, Statism and Civilizationism

collective mentality of many nationalist Russian. Belonging to a Great Power in Russia is a powerful feeling that arises from self-perception and is institutionalized in the Russian mentality under the name of "Derzhavnost". The Russians feel that Russia has the right to be a great power due to components such as the country's vast area, great resources such as oil and gas, history, and even ideology, as a defender of Christianity and communism in the world. In addition to the components above, other factors, such as Russia's role in the Concert of Europe in the 19th century, its position as a great power in the 19th century, and its twentieth-century superpower, are etched in the Russians' unconscious minds (Neumann, 2008: 37-39). Putting Putin at the helm of political power in Russia should be seen as the beginning of the process of its return to the club of great world powers. In the documents of Russian foreign policy from 2000 to 2016, the road map and structural framework are drawn revival of Russia's position. In the foreign policy documents of 2000, 2008, 2013, and 2016, one can see the thought of returning to the position of great power. In Russia's foreign policy document in 2016, special attention has been paid to the Middle East. In this document, foreign intervention is considered the root of the problems in the Middle East, and the military entry into a crisis-stricken country to fight terrorism is subject to request and permission of the government attacked by terrorism. Russia's military doctrine has also sought to revive Russia's military position among the world's great powers over the past two decades. According to these doctrines, the Russian armed forces in the 21st century must be commensurate with Russia at the level of a great power.

## **II-Situation of Syria**

Although Russia's power projection during the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea marked a turning point in

its activism as a great power, it has made special investments in Syria to restore its position in the global power structure. Syria has a special place in the strategy of restoring the position of Russia's great power, in comparison with Iraq, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Lebanon, which are considered to be the centers of conflict in the Middle East. The Moscow authorities' perceptions of the experience of Russia's marginalization during the Iraq and Libya crises was that if Russia was eliminated in the Russian crisis, it would lose its position in the Middle East. Putin strongly criticized the NATO-led coalition attack on Libya saying: The Libyan operation showed us that we must stop the Western intervention in the Middle East and "no one can repeat the Libyan scenario in Syria" (Borshchevskaya, 2018, 21-22). For this reason, the Russians saw Syria as a new Yalta, in the light of which they had to play an effective role in dividing the new world. Russia's military engagement in the Syrian war in 2015 was its first direct military operation since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Cengiz, 2020: 9). Syria's historical relations with Russia provided the necessary basis for its activism. Syria was one of the old Soviet allies during the Cold War. Hafez al-Assad was one of the Soviet Union's main allies in the 1970s. The Tartus military base in the Mediterranean, almost near the Syrian-Lebanese border, is the only navy base outside the Soviet Union that has been preserved by Russia due to its strategic importance. Given that Syria's relations with the United States were very cold and tense, especially because of its close relations with Iran and the lack of alignment in the Middle East peace process, Bashar al-Assad has continued, even strengthened, his father's legacy that is close ties to Moscow. He moved to Moscow in 2005 to continue his country's historic financial and military assistance to Russia. It was in this direction that Russia forgave \$ 9.8 billion of Syria's \$ 13.4

billion debts. In addition, military relations between the two countries greatly expanded during the 2010s so that Military exchanges between the two countries increased to \$ 4.7 billion between 2007 and 2010 (Qurik, 2017: 118). Although the Middle East is a region that is particularly attractive for foreign actors to intervene for various reasons and is a permeable system, the emergence of the Arab Spring movement in the Arab Middle East and North Africa, led to profound transformations in the region and the region entered a period of grand transformation. Some actors, especially non-Western actors, seek to form a new order and try to form a regional security system with their collaborators (Casula, 2020: 228). This transition coincides with new classifications and formal and informal coalitions of transnational, non-state, and international actors, and, according to Saikal, the Middle East is experiencing a "geopolitical transition and resistance to it" (Saikal, 2016: 1). Russia, using the US government's reluctance to play a full-fledged role in the Middle East crisis, especially after Obama era which rejected the theory of the inevitability of the US involvement in crises across the globe, has interpreted Syria as a good opportunity to return to the Middle East and, consequently, to the structure of world power.

After three decades of military presence in Afghanistan, Russia gradually regained its power by intervening in Syria and went to the near abroad region after Ukraine and Georgia.

### **III-Russia and the Main Actors in the Syrian Crisis**

Russia's activism in Syria is part of the country's grand strategy to create a sphere of influence, but the way to achieve this goal is different from the Soviet era. The main feature of Russia's strategy in the Syrian crisis has been selective cooperation with regional actors, despite the tensions between them, and establishing a comprehensive relationship with all

actors involved in this crisis. (Stepenova, 2016: 9). Russian theorists believe that several centers of power or a kind of quasi-empire will emerge in the future and that the world of the future should not be shaped by American centrality. Rather, several centers of power must be created by networks of alliances between different countries. Due to the lack of serious will of the great powers in the Middle East, Russia has played a key role and concerning its regionalist policy has formed various alliances with regional actors, including Egypt, Jordan, and Qatar. (Stepenova, 2018: 10).

One of these actors is Turkey, which had deep-rooted conflicts with Syria, and was concerned about the emergence of another Kurdish region in Syria, similar to the one created in Iraq. US support for the Syrian Kurds<sup>2</sup> and their rise to power was worrying for Turkey as the Kurdish crisis inside Turkey intensified after the failed 2016 coup. For this reason, Turkey, by hosting forces opposed to Bashar al-Assad, became practically one of the main parties in this crisis. The arrival of more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees in Turkey in 2017 (Sever, 2020: 12-13) also led Ankara to prioritize activism in Syria in its foreign policy and achieve its goals by aligning itself with other actors in the crisis. Turkey's relations with countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and even Iran were strained over the Syrian crisis. Turkey was in a kind of regional isolation facing an internal crisis after the 2016 coup, which attracted the attention of Russia. Russia has sought to strengthen relations with Turkey after accepting Turkey's apology for downing a Russian fighter jet. Russia's relationship with Turkey was especially important to Moscow after the sale of the Russian S-400 to Turkey to create a gap in NATO. Turkey's adjacency to Syria, historical disputes between the two countries, especially

over water resources, a powerful military force, and most importantly, Turkey's relationship with parts of the Syrian opposition, have led Putin to pay special attention to Turkey in his Middle East strategy.

Saudi Arabia, another regional power and activist in the Syrian crisis, attracted Russia's attention despite its strategic relationship with the United States. Saudi Arabia's strong positioning on Syria cannot be ignored by Russia. Russia's relations with Saudi Arabia, which is the most important source of funding for anti-Assad groups, are very necessary (Stepenova, 2018: 11). The perception of Saudi authorities of the developments in the Middle East, especially after the fall of Saddam, and especially the developments in Syria, has been the rising power of Iran and even its transformation into a major threat to Saudi Arabia. Russia has a special place in Saudi Arabia's new approach. On the one hand, it becomes a tool for gaining concessions from the United States, especially since Joe Biden took office, which does not expect unwavering support from the United States like Trump era, on the other hand, it is a means to contain Iran. Under such circumstances, Russia, realizing the concerns of the Saudi officials, included this country in its holistic alliance. For Russia, entering the Arabian Peninsula and expanding relations with a country that acts as a bigger brother to the Arabs in the region is a big goal per se. Bin Salman's visit to Moscow and Putin's visit to Riyadh are signs of a change in relations between the two countries and their mutual need for each other.

The joint efforts of Saudi Arabia and Russia, which began in 2016, finally led to the creation of OPEC Plus (OPEC +) in 2019, consisting of OPEC members and 11 non-OPEC producers, including Russia. Russia and Saudi Arabia have common interests in OPEC Plus, and this relationship can influence global equations, and is an important factor,

especially for Russia's rise back to power. Russia even cooperates with Saudi Arabia in the field of nuclear energy. In 2015, it signed six agreements with this country for the construction of civilian nuclear power plants. Saudi Arabia plans to build 16 nuclear power plants with Russia (Arafat, 2020: 68).

Israel is another regional power that has a special place in Russia's holistic alliance in the Middle East. The occurrence of a severe crisis in Syria has been a matter of concern for Israel. According to Israeli officials, Iran's military presence in Syria means the completion of the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut corridor, and Iran has extended its security and defense borders to the Israeli border in the light of the Syrian crisis by deploying proxy forces. Iran's military presence in Syria, as well as the presence of Hezbollah, Iran's main ally, with its extensive missile stockpiles along Israel's borders activated during the 2006 war, poses a significant threat to Tel Aviv. Iran and Israel are competing in Syria to form a new order.

The logic of Israel's presence in Russia's holistic alliance is somewhat different from that of other actors. Russia's relationship with Israel is influenced by fundamental factors that strengthen the depth of their relationship. Historically, most Jews who settled in Palestinian ghettos in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century had migrated from Russia and the Eastern Bloc. During the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the influx of large numbers of Jewish immigrants, one-fifth of Israel's population was made up of Russian Jews. Relations between Jews in Israel and Russia are still extensive. From Russia's point of view, Israel is an important player in the Middle East, and a strong Jewish lobby in the United States, especially AIPAC, could be an important factor in the US government's decisions toward Russia. Due to the highly special relations between Iran and Russia, Israel pursues

multiple goals by joining Putin's alliance. Iran's diplomatic containment by Russia lies at the forefront of such goals. On the one hand, Israel is trying to benefit from the US's tough strategy towards Iran, and on the other hand, it is trying to manage Iran's regional power and prevent the expansion of Iran's nuclear activities through close relations with Russia. According to some sources, Russia and Israel have many agreements on military operations in Syria; even Russia has guaranteed that Iranian forces will not approach less than 85 km from the Israeli border (Rashidi et al., 2019: 64-65). The control of Syrian airspace by the Russian defense system has also been such that Israel has repeatedly attacked positions attributed to pro-Iranian forces. The attacks intensified late in Trump's presidency to provoke Iran to fight with the United States. Putin has visited Israel three times during his presidency (2005, 2012, and 2020), and the Former Prime Minister of Israel has visited Moscow four times only in 2020. Russia also enjoys Israeli and indirect US support for Syria. The trade volume between the two countries in 2019 was five billion dollars. Russia plays the balancing role between Iran and Israel and neither of them is superior to the other. Even in 2018, according to Al-Jazeera analyst, Russia reached an unofficial and tacit agreement for Iranian proxy forces on the Syrian-Israeli border to stop airstrikes on positions in Syria that do not pose a direct threat to Israeli security. Russia has threatened the two sides that if they do not live up to their informal commitments which have been repeatedly violated, it will equip Syria with air defenses such as S300 and TOR-M1 against Israeli airstrikes and it will reduce air support for Iranian-backed forces in Syria. Russia's arbitration between Iran and Israel has turned the situation into a political lever in the region and gives it international credibility. For that reason, it would very much like to maintain the status quo of Israeli-Iranian tensions without open conflict.

The collapse of the current regime in Tehran as a result of US military actions is not in Russia's interest either. This matter considers Iran as an important player in the Middle East, a bulwark against US hegemony, and a suitable partner that can be an important supporter of Russia's diplomatic initiatives in the region (Kozhanov: 2020). Russia's endgame in Syria seeks to promote Moscow's interests in three concentric arenas: (1) Syria's multi-layered conflict; (2) Russia's role in regional/Middle East dynamics; and (3) Moscow's broader conception of an evolving global order. These elements are loosely inter-connected. Russia's dominant posture in Syria serves as a platform for its engagement across the Middle East, while also advancing a worldview that seeks to further erode the U.S.-led, rules-based international order. (Yacoubian: 2021)

#### **IV-Iran's and Russia's position in Syria**

While the positions of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey contradicted Iran's positions in Syria, Russia's entry is seen as a turning point in managing the Syrian crisis. Russia is the only trans-regional actor which is related to all four actors in the Syrian crisis and its special relationship with the Islamic Republic is a comparative advantage for Russia in creating a holistic alliance in this crisis. Russia is not only trying to have good relations with all the major players in the region, but it is also trying to stay neutral in the conflicts and disputes between them. Sergey Lavrov once said that Russia did not want American-style influence, which has to build alliances with its allies at the expense of third parties because of its many bases in the region. Russia, on the other hand, seeks to influence and strengthen its influence through dialogue with all parties and peace initiatives that will lead to the formation of inclusive governments in the region (Barzegar, 2019).

Although Russia has extensive relations with Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Turkey, Russia plays a secondary role in the three other actors and in case of strategic options and conflicts of interest between Russia and the US, they prefer the US. Their participation in Russia's holistic alliance in the Syrian crisis is to exploit Russia's position in limiting Iran in Syria and consequently in the region. But Iran's position in this alliance is very different. Similarly, Iran, like the other three countries, does not have strategic choices to choose its allies among the supra-regional powers, and a kind of strategic force has brought it closer to Russia. In contrast, from the Russian perspective, Iran has special capabilities that Russia is using to restore its position in the Middle East. The relations between Russia and Iran can be analyzed in light of the transformation in the perceptions of the officials of the two countries towards each other on a level beyond Syria. On the one hand, Iran's orientation towards Russia is rooted in Iranian policymakers' perceptions of the decline of the American hegemonic role in the world and the post-American world. Senior Iranian officials have repeatedly cited the analysis of some scholars who believe that the decline of US hegemony is inevitable but will not be replaced suddenly by a multipolar system and a "multiple and complex" system at the regional level will replace it. (2014: Acharya). "The United States is collapsing," said Mohsen Rezaei, secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council. America's defense power, which has been an important tool in American domination, has been severely weakened. The United States has lost its leadership in many parts of the world, and proxy battles have gone nowhere. "If we only watch the decline of the United States and other countries and civilizations replace the decline of the United States, we will only be the spectators of these developments." (Rezaei: 2020). The former Iranian ambassador to Russia, who is one of the Russian

academic scholars in Iran, also believes that a balance in favor of the East is taking place in the international system, which is happening without the need to exaggerate. (Sanaei: 2019).

From the perspective of the Islamic Republic's policymakers, the "East" will shape the world order more than any other actor in the post-American world. Accordingly, Iran's new foreign policy is the grand doctrine of Iran's foreign policy under the title of "Pivot to the East". According to this policy, extensive security, political, military and economic cooperation with the Asian giants, namely China and Russia, will be directed. Iran's new policy of a "Pivot to the East" involves cultivating strong economic, political, military, and security ties with the giants of the Asian continent, namely, China and Russia. (Mousavian: 2020). Senior Iranian policymakers at the theoretical and practical levels are trying to change Iran's strategic culture towards the East. In Iranian strategic culture, the "Treaty of Turkmenchay" is a symbol of the miserable negotiation that has separated many northern regions from Iran. Accordingly, the historical and collective mentality of Iranians toward the East and Russia is negative. The continued hostility of the United States to Iran, especially Trump's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and breach of the obligations that the US was obligated under Security Council Resolution no. 2231, as well as the inaction of the Europeans towards the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), has caused Iranian policymakers to replace the symbol of fruitless interaction and harmful international agreements from Treaty of Turkmenchay with Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) by highlighting non-Western countries (Russia and China). In Iran's view, Russia can balance Iran's position on international issues, especially the West, and deter other regional powers and disrupt their efforts to eliminate Iran's role in the region. Iran considers

Moscow's political support, especially its veto power in the Security Council, and its capabilities and equipment as an important capacity to strengthen its foreign policy, and welcomes full cooperation with Moscow (Khosh Khati et al., 2020: 137).

On the other hand, Russia's view of Iran has changed, and Iran's perceptions of the changing international system have intersected with some of Russia's foreign policy discourses. In post-Soviet Russian foreign policy, Iran's position has changed from a "southern threat" to use it as a tool to gain concessions from the West, a "natural partner against a common enemy". Ultimately, while during the hegemonic period of the Atlantism discourse, the Russian foreign minister refused to meet his Iranian counterpart, the orientation of Russia's foreign policy towards Iran has become more positive with the emergence of the Neo-Eurasianism discourse. Russia sees Iran as a good foothold in the Middle East due to its location between the Levant and the Caucasus, with a special geopolitical position (Stepanova, 2018, 42-45). Like the Iranian side, Russian think tanks and theorists have played an important role in directing Russian foreign policy toward Iran. Iran is an important part of the Eurasianism ideology put forward by Aleksandr Dugin. He sees Iran as a key element in the anti-American empire and Russia's best ally (at least outside the Soviet Union). Dugin exemplifies the Russian elite's gravitation towards a broad alliance with the countries of the Middle East, especially Iran. He believes Russia should spread its net widely in search of alliances in Asia, but the Muslim countries are the most prominent catch. Iran is a key player, but even there a geopolitical alliance might not be successful. Dugin sees Iran as a key element in the web of the anti-American empire and nuclear power, and as Russia's best ally - at least outside the territory of the former USSR. In his opinion, and definitely not

his alone, post-revolutionary Iran is spotless (Shlapentokh, 2008: 252). Dugin saw the Moscow-Tehran axis as a “Eurasian” counterbalance to what he perceived as a “hostile” America. (Shlapentokh: 2020).

Dr. Rajab S. Safarov, a Russian Iranian expert who has a significant influence on the direction of Russia's foreign policy towards Iran, said any country that threatens the stability of Iran also threatens the stability of Russia. He cited two reasons for Russia's presence in Syria: one is that Russia realized that ISIL is the first thing to do, and if it did not get involved in the Syrian issue, it should engage directly with ISIL on Russia's borders, and the other was the US plan to weaken Iran's fulcrums in Syria and consequently, the way was opened to weaken Russia. (Safarov: 2017). Positive perceptions of Iran and Russia at different political and ideological levels have led Vladimir Putin to meet Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, three times in recent years. The essence of these long meetings, some of which lasted more than an hour and a half or two hours (Russian President's meeting with the Supreme Leader of the Revolution (2017) is due to a change in mutual views. General Qasem Soleimani, who coordinated Iran's military activities in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, visited Russia at least twice in 2015 and 2017 (Rodkiewicz 2019: 6).

Given the favorable context created in the general relationship between Iran and Russia, the Syrian crisis showed Iran's potential for a holistic alliance in Syria. Iran's first capacity has been to use the power of Iran's hybrid forces in the military arena. Although military power alone cannot place a country among the Great Powers' Club, the reality is that without military might, no country can place itself among the Great Powers' Club. Russia has always had a special place in international politics in terms of military power. The power projection and military intervention in the Middle East crises

have changed dramatically since the Cold War. Perhaps the most important reason for US military failure in Afghanistan and Iraq, despite its high financial and human costs, has been its adherence to the principles of the Cold War era in conflicts in various regions, including the Middle East.

One of the achievements of the Islamic Republic in the Middle East is the new military methods in the region. Unlike other regional actors, all of which are US-backed militarily and politically, Iran has been able to become one of the major players in the region. Iran's strategy is to cooperate with a wide network of hybrid actors in the region. Hybrid forces, unlike proxy forces, which are a kind of puppet force, are rooted groups that have been active in the Middle East for many years and provide not only security, but also play a role in politics and economics to part of their people. Having a militia, a kind of economic self-sufficiency, having an extensive service network, and benefiting from an ideology for mobilizing forces can be called the most important characteristics of hybrid actors (Cambanis and others, 2019: 16-19). Contrary to many studies that called all non-state actors in the Middle East proxy actors (Seliktar and Rezaei: 2020), due to the socio-political structure of Middle Eastern countries, the governments are not the only actors in the political and social spheres. Iran has been able to connect with an extensive network of these social forces that have become Iran's comparative advantage in the region. Based on the Soviet experience in the military occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s and the US experience in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in recent decades, Russia has concluded that Russia's full military presence in Syria may severely affect its vulnerable economy. For this reason, it has limited its military presence in Syria to the airspace only and has made good use of Iran's military power in the region, especially in Syria. The presence of Iranian advisory forces due to its long-

term presence in Syria, in connection with hybrid groups, is one of the special and exclusive capacities of Iran in Syria, which Russia needs to restore its great power. Russia has not only used the power of hybrid actors through Iran, but also the only foreign country that has been able to use Iran's military bases, which is a comparative advantage and exclusive feature of Russia compared to other regional and international actors. Russian bombers have been using Hamadan Airbase in Iran to carry out bombings in Syria since August 2016 (Rodkiewicz, 2019: 6). Russia, which has always been a major arms seller to the Islamic Republic, also signed extensive military agreements with Iran after Putin visited Tehran in November 2015. Under the February 2016 agreement, the two sides agreed on an \$ 8 billion deal for military equipment, including T-90 tanks, Sukhoi Su-30 fighter jets, Attack helicopter, anti-ship missiles, and the S-300 missile system. Russia delivered the S-300 system to Iran in October 2016. Putin has emphasized his desire to increase the level of Tehran-Moscow relations to the level of strategic partnership (Arafat, 2020: 69). Russia had a military presence in Syria by dividing its duties, conducting air operations and supporting ground forces managed by Iranian advisory forces at the lowest cost, and by using Iran's military capacity. According to a report prepared for the US Congress, more than 2,000 Iranian troops (including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran) were present in Syria between 2013 and 2015. In addition, 7,000 Hezbollah Fighters were deployed in Syria. According to Katzman, Iran was able to mobilize between 24,000 and 80,000 militias in Syria, 10,000 of which were Shiite militias from countries such as Pakistan, Iraq, and Afghanistan (Katzman, 2021: 33). For the military, the necessary main partner is Iran, since the safety of Russian bases and convoys could only be ensured by close ties with pro-

Iranian militias. The division of labor with Iran in building combat-capable units in the disorganized Syrian army has worked perhaps not entirely as Russian advisors would prefer, as even the Russian-trained Fourth Corps in the Latakia province includes distinctly pro-Iranian units (Baev: 2019). If Iran did not play a role in Syria, the cost of Russia would be very high. Russia has spent between one to two billion dollars per year on the war in Syria. Also, Russia has lost about 200 soldiers since it has joined the war (Bibbo: 2021).

Iran's other capacity for Russia in the Syrian crisis is in diplomatic arena. The continuation of the severance of political relations between Iran and the United States and the escalation of tensions between them, especially during Trump era, which went to the brink of a violent war for several times; Iran's tense relations with its regional neighbors, as well as the stagnation and policy of patience of Europe and even China, have strengthened Russia's political ties with Iran. In its global strategy, Russia sees the Middle East as a large chessboard in which Iran is a major player. Russia, which has extensive ties with other actors involved in the Syrian crisis, has sought to return to the great powers' club in the diplomatic arena, relying on its special relationship with Iran. Russians consider Iran as their diplomatic backyard and from this point of view they have an important diplomatic card in their hands. One of the most important indicators of great power is its diplomatic power. Russia has such a capacity outside and near its borders, and in the light of the Syrian crisis; it has tried to neutralize the US diplomatic presence in the Syrian crisis to restore its regional governance. In the regional arena, Russia has stated in practice that Iran is part of the solution to the Syrian problem and thus has supported it, and this is very important for Iran.

Military engagement is only one dimension of a civil war in countries like Syria, and the warring factions push

simultaneously for political mobilization to gain allies as well as legitimacy and pass resolutions in international forums in their own favor. Opposition diplomacy refers to the behavior of opposition groups of a state in a foreign government during a civil war aimed at facilitating access to political and military goals. This type of diplomacy creates the interaction and action of opponents within a territory with the structure of international politics (Regan, 1996: 337). In the process of diplomacy, the opposition seeks to use diplomatic means to send signals to other international actors that they are the main and real alternative to the ruling government and thus enjoy *De jure* authority (Mampily, 2013: 23). Russia, with the help of Iran and then Turkey, was able to stop the diplomatic campaign of Bashar al-Assad's opposition, which at some point centered on the Arab League and then the United Nations and the active participation of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia, the United States and indirect support of Israel which had promoted to the level of international recognition. Russia, a member of the Geneva talks, began the Astana talks in 2016 with Turkey and then Iran to take the initiative in the Syrian crisis. Similarly, opposition representatives and the state of Syria negotiated in Astana in 2017 (Cengiz, 2020: 6). The Astana talks have been held more than 15 times and Russia has practically become the diplomatic center of the Syrian crisis. Thus, after the military success, it has also achieved diplomatic success, in which the role and position of Iran in this situation of Russia has been superior to other actors. Just as no military development in Syria would be successful without Iran, no diplomatic process would be successful without Iran, and Russia's special position in the Astana talks has made Russia benefit from Iran's diplomatic power. Given its experience with the Libyan crisis, Russia used its veto power at the United Nations for the Syrian crisis, and

that was what Iran needed to move forward on the military front.

According to the strategy of hedging and holistic alliance, Iran's cooperation with Russia has faced challenges. For example, Russian commanders need full combat cooperation with Iranian counterparts for the planned offensive on the rebel-held Idlib province, while Russian leadership is not altogether comfortable with the prospect of an Iranian base near Latakia even though it is in accordance with the agreement to expand cooperation, which the al-Assad regime signed with Iran in mid-2018 (Baev: 2019).

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this article was to review Iran's position to restore Russia's position as a major power during the Syrian crisis. The result of the hypothesis processing is that Russia, by mastering the capabilities and at the same times the weaknesses in its components of power, as well as learning from the Soviet procedure and pathology of the weaknesses of supra-regional powers such as the United States in the Middle East and especially Syria, has started the strategy of restoring the position of power. Russia has launched a global campaign to return from Syria due to economic weakness and the lack of strategic allies such as Europe and the United States. While the United States, with its antagonistic and transformational approach, led to the continuation and intensification of crises in the Middle East, and at great cost, it has outsourced the Middle East to its actors and reduced its obligations through the transfer of responsibility but Russia has partnered with all the actors in the Middle East without paying much, with a Hedging strategy and holistic alliance, with an agonist approach and almost without hostility to any country in the region. Russia's goal in cooperating with any of its allies is to manage conflicts and

tensions in the Middle East and, consequently, to turn this management into a privilege to play in a field beyond the Middle East. Given that all the major players in the Middle East are interacting with the Western world, Russia's comparative advantage and exclusive privilege is its close relationship with the Islamic Republic. Russia has used Iran's capabilities to manage the Syrian crisis at the military and diplomatic levels. At the same time, it is trying to get concessions from the Western world under the management of Iran, and at the same time, it is receiving its concessions from Iran. Despite extensive cooperation between Russia and Iran in Syria, these relations cannot be extended to other areas. Given Russia's relatively successful record in Syria, it is not easy to predict that Russia will achieve significant international concessions. Russia has taken the first step back in the field of foreign policy cautiously and purposefully and now feels that it has some of the characteristics of a great power, but it can be said with caution that this power is at the regional level and not beyond. The success of Iran-Russia cooperation in the Syrian crisis has provided a good platform for further cooperation. Because Iran-West relations are tense, Iran has based its cooperation with Russia on Syria on a long-term strategy for cooperation with the East. Iran has less bargaining power than other Russian allies in the holistic alliance. However, Iran's transition from a severe economic crisis to a brief opening in the nuclear talks will increase Iran's maneuverability. Iran, which had a special position in Russia's strategy in Syria, has also tried to strengthen its position in Russia's global policy in the Ukraine crisis. For this reason, not only did it defend Russia's attack on Ukraine as a pre-military action but according to unofficial sources, exported his drones to Russia to be used in the battle of Ukraine.

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