

Strategic Analysis Paper

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Dire Straits: Iran's Search for Allies – Part Two

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Key Points

- Iran's rulers are concerned that their regime faces increasingly difficult challenges.
- Russia wants to retain its foothold in the Middle East to maintain its influence there while ensuring that it continues to be perceived as a great power.
- Turkey's leaders are growing increasingly concerned that their country's sovereignty and, by extension, their hold on power, is at stake.
- Those issues have motivated the three countries to come together but it remains unclear if the grouping will last for any reasonable length of time.

Summary

The [first part of this paper](#) examined some of the issues that are a cause of major concern for the regime in Tehran. They include a distinctly hostile President of the United States who, while he has not enunciated it in as many words, has placed the issue of regime change on the table. President Trump has authorised strikes on targets in Syria and has, by conducting those, killed armed personnel from Syria, Russia and, likely, Iran. He has, moreover, withdrawn the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, also known as the Iran Nuclear Agreement) and has re-imposed nuclear [sanctions](#) on Tehran.

Keeping up the pressure on Tehran, the US and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) took combined action to disrupt a currency exchange network spread across Iran and the UAE that [provided hundreds of millions of dollars](#) to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force, an entity that Washington has designated a terrorist group. The Office of Foreign Assets Control at the US Department of the Treasury subsequently designated nine Iranian individuals and entities, including Iran's Central Bank, for their complicity in that operation on 10 May. Not satisfied with that, on 15 May, the Trump Administration [designated](#) the head of the Central Bank, Valiollah Seif, as a terrorist, making it virtually impossible for the bank to conduct business anywhere in the world, further constraining Iran.

The change of attitude towards Iran is in stark contrast to the approach taken by the Obama Administration in its dealings with it. Gone is the virtual obsequiousness and the do-almost-anything-to-effect-an-agreement attitude. Absent from the current administration's approach is the willingness to [halt an investigation](#) into cocaine-smuggling into the United States by Hezbollah in order to ensure that Tehran entered into an agreement to halt its nuclear programme, albeit temporarily, as the Obama Administration allegedly enacted.

Analysis

The changed approach towards Iran by the Trump Administration is music to the ears of Iran hawks in Israel. So enthused is Prime Minister Netanyahu with the hard line taken by President Trump towards Iran, his backing of Israel against Hamas and his promise to move the embassy of the United States to Jerusalem that Israel has [minted a coin](#) with his face on it. More practically, Tel Aviv has been sufficiently emboldened to intentionally and overtly [attack Iranian personnel and targets](#) in Syria and to speak of attacking Iran itself, should it be attacked.

Those two countries aside, the theocracy in Tehran faces what is arguably an even more pressing concern: the dissatisfaction of its own citizens with their economic and social conditions. After the JCPOA was signed in 2015, an estimated US\$100 billion to US\$150 billion of Iranian funds that had been held in the United States were unfrozen and [returned to Iran](#). It was later announced (in 2016) that President Obama had authorised the transfer of an [additional US\\$400 million](#) in cash as the first instalment of a US\$1.7 billion settlement resolving claims at an international tribunal at The Hague over a failed arms deal from the time of Reza Shah Pahlavi. These vast amounts did not reach Iranian citizens, however. They continued to suffer economic hardships and finally, on 28 December 2017, rose up against the regime. For the first time, they [called](#) for the death of various ayatollahs, including the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Hosseini Khamenei. During the demonstrations, many Iranian women removed their headscarves as a sign of their frustration with what they saw as their repression.

The regime, in short, now feels the pressure that these issues have brought down on it and, out of desperation it appears, has started to take steps to ensure that its hold on power will continue.

It is important to note that it is not just the actions of foreign and domestic actors that cause the regime concern; it is itself guilty of poor strategising. Its successes against the Obama Administration emboldened it to support the Houthi insurgency in Yemen – effectively a proxy war against Saudi Arabia – to enter the Syrian Civil War in support of the Assad regime and initiate another proxy war, this time via Hezbollah, against Israel. It, nevertheless, remained relatively insulated until recently because its troops remained within Iran, for the greater part, and because the Obama Administration did not have the political will to carry the fight to it. That calculus has changed with Tehran's move to deploy some of its troops to Syria.

Israel has used that fact to denounce Iran as an existential threat, in addition to attacking those forces and Iranian installations. More importantly, however, the presence of Iranian forces in Syria gives the United States the reason and the justification to take military actions against those forces. Iran is now overstretched and will soon need to retreat if it has not already started to do so. A retreat would signify a major loss of face for the regime, however, causing it to be seen as being unable to adequately plan its moves. That retreat and the ensuing perceptions of weakness could also be anathema to its Revolutionary Guard, since it is they who will be doing the retreating in part. That could lead to their anger against the Ayatollahs who have now added insult to the injury sustained through Israeli attacks on their forces in Syria. It is more than likely that the theocracy, recognising that danger, fears a revolt of hardliners against their continued rule.

The situation being clearly untenable, an implosion being a heightened possibility, the theocracy has sought out political allies. Who better to ally with than those countries that are also feeling the brunt of the Trump Administration? Enter Turkey and Russia.

Moscow's Motivations

In 2015, after Russia intervened in Syria, the Syrian opposition all but collapsed and Islamic State was defeated in virtually all of the cities and towns it held soon after. President Putin hosted Bashar al-Assad in Sochi in November last year and [announced](#) that Assad was committed to constitutional reform, free and open elections and an overall peace process. He next called on Iran and Turkey to work with Russia on reconstructing Syria's infrastructure, [saying](#), 'Given the colossal scale of the destruction, it would be possible to think together about the development of a comprehensive programme for Syria.' That was a repeat of his [statement](#) to Assad that 'The most important question, of course, is what will happen after the defeat of the terrorists in terms of a peaceful political settlement.'

It is clear that the meeting between the three countries – Russia, Iran and Turkey, all of which are heavily invested in Syria – was geared to ensure that Assad would remain in power. That goal is hardly surprising, since both Russia and Iran back Assad for a variety of reasons. The port of Tartus in Syria, which hosts a Russian fleet, was the drop-off point for Russian military equipment in 2015, when Russia first intervened in the civil war. Next, Russian marines were [seen](#) at Assad International Airport near Latakia, which is around one hundred kilometres south of Tartus. These ports provide Russia with a presence in the region and direct access to the Mediterranean Sea. Tartus and Latakia also provide Russia's Black Sea fleet with access to open water beyond the eastern Mediterranean. Russia is,

therefore, hardly likely to do anything but support Assad, who provides them with this opportunity, and ensure that he remains in power.

By retaining a presence in the region, President Putin also ensures that Russia has a role to play in any developments there. That coincides with his goal of making Russia a great power once again. A presence in the Middle East also enables Russia to be perceived as a counter to the major presence of the United States there. Russia could be viewed by those Arab states that are not overly friendly with Washington as a providing a balance to, for instance, the American Fifth Fleet, which is stationed in Bahrain. It is relatively easy for the Russian leader to ensure that his country remains involved in the region; he need only continue to build on the ties that the Soviet Union created with authoritarian regimes there during the Cold War. It is those same ties that keep Russia in the region; they perceive any unrest there as a security threat to themselves. By that reasoning, Russia did not intervene in Syria solely to alleviate the threat to Assad; Moscow was concerned that Islamic State's influence could spread to Muslim-majority regions like Chechnya once again. Syria offers a base from which Russian forces could continue to carry out operations against Islamic State and ensure the continued elimination of that group's fighters, even if [secretive arrangements](#) were made by other countries to allow them to escape. Russia, in short, has a good deal of incentive to ensure that Bashar al-Assad remains in power.

President Putin does not appear to believe that he needs Iran's support to achieve that, however, and appears to have made a clear distinction between keeping Assad in power and assisting Iran to further its agenda there. On 9 May this year, Prime Minister Netanyahu met with President Putin in Moscow, where he was allegedly given the go-ahead to strike Iranian targets there. Very soon after that meeting, Mr Netanyahu [stated](#) that he understood that Russia would be unlikely to limit Israel's military actions in Syria. Mere hours later, Israeli fighter aircraft conducted several [strikes](#) against Iranian targets in Syria, followed by the statement that it had destroyed "dozens" of Iranian installations there, including observation posts, weapon storage facilities, intelligence facilities and a logistic centre. Tellingly, Russian-operated S-300 anti-missile systems in Syria did not deploy to stop those strikes.

Turkish Involvement

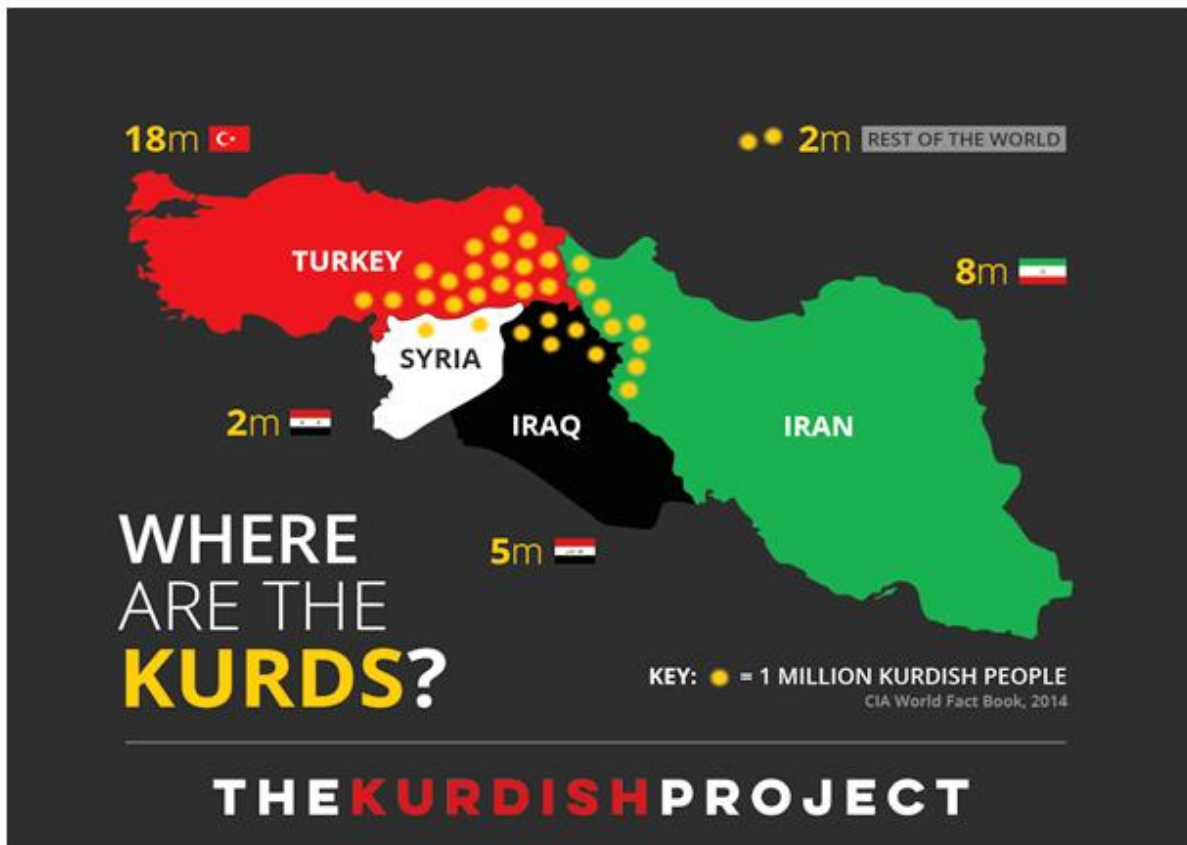
Turkey, for its part, has declared that Assad had to be deposed since at least 2011. While that would appear to put it at odds with Russia at first glance, the situation is far more nuanced than that. Turkey does not appear to have changed its mind about toppling Assad or working with other countries to see him toppled. In their perspective, Assad has caused them no end of trouble by instigating the civil war in Syria and leaving Ankara with thousands of refugees streaming across the common border who have to be cared for at no small expense.

That aside, Turkey is also concerned that the Kurds seek a homeland and are using the war in Syria and the fragile political situation in Iraq to press their claims for one. Turkey does not wish to have a contiguous, Kurdish territory running alongside its border, especially after Kurdish groups [declared](#) the establishment of a federal system in northern Syria that they captured from Islamic State and named Western Kurdistan. Turkey fears that its own Kurdish

population may seek to break away from Turkey, together with their strongholds in eastern Turkey. Were that to happen, it would be a severe blow to Turkey's sovereignty and an overturning of the principles established by Kemal Ataturk when he founded modern Turkey.

In the early twentieth century, the Kurdish people, listening carefully to the ideas put forward by Great Britain began to voice their demands for a state of their own. The 1920 Treaty of Sevres, which created present day Iraq, Kuwait and Syria, was to have included the possibility of a Kurdish state in the region. That idea was never implemented. After Ataturk overthrew the Turkish monarchy, Turkey, Iran and Iraq agreed not to recognise an independent Kurdish state. That agreement has continued until the present time.

Any loss of territory, not to mention the estimated eighteen million Kurds who live in Turkey, would only diminish that state internationally. It could, moreover, see the United States pay more attention to a newly-sovereign Kurdistan due to its geostrategic position. If a proposed Kurdistan were to ever eventuate, it would be in a prime geographical position for the United States to use to its advantage. It could provide proximity to Russia, Iran and Iraq. At a time when the Turkey-US relationship is declining, a newly-minted Kurdistan could be made a member of NATO or a similar alliance forged between it and the United States. To the rest of the world, Kurdistan's energy resources would be a very attractive drawcard.



Turkey's third incentive for intervening in Syria was to confront Islamic State but that was, compared to the two issues above, a fairly minor one. Interestingly, it was also reported [see [here](#) and [here](#), for instance] that Russian fighter aircraft bombed a convoy of Islamic State oil

tankers near the Turkish border. It was alleged that Turkey deliberately chose to purchase oil from Islamic State, in contravention of international sanctions, because such purchases could be had at up to 75 per cent less than normally-established prices.

Turkey, then, had at least as much reason to intervene in Syria as Russia and Iran. They, equally, had reason to collaborate to ensure that their respective regional goals were not dashed by the various factors that they encountered in and around Syria. Unsurprisingly then, after the trilateral meeting in Sochi for the “Syrian National Dialogue Congress”, the Iranian Foreign Minister’s Special Assistant for Political Affairs, Hossein Jaber Ansari, announced in January 2018, in a meeting with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov in Moscow, that Iran and Russia must hold close consultations on developments in the Middle East and the Arab world, [saying](#), ‘The two countries have great capacities to solve regional problems, particularly with regard to the fight against terrorism and we hope that these consultations will help boost and develop such capacities.’ The reference to the Arab world was interesting in that, while the statement could have been construed as indicating Syria, it could just as easily have been targeted at Iran’s regional competitor, Saudi Arabia. Iran, itself, is not an Arab country in any sense of the term.

In April this year, Iran’s *Tasnim News Agency* [reported](#) that Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif announced that Iran would enter into an agreement with Russia to co-operate with Moscow in the Eurasian Economic Union. Russia appears to be cementing its presence in the Middle East and Iran growing closer to potentially gaining a nuclear-armed ally against an aggressive US president and his coterie of hardline anti-Iran hawks. Russia, for its part, [agreed](#) to maintain its support for the JCPOA and Iran. Those agreements are on paper, however. As the Israeli air strikes on Iranian targets in Syria this month show, Russia may wish to continue to trade with Iran after the United States withdrawal from the JCPOA but does not appear to be aligned with, far less supportive of, the Iranian theocracy’s ambitions of gaining influence in Syria and potentially challenging its own efforts in that direction. Alliances, it would appear, have very finite limits.

In the final analysis, Iran, Russia and Turkey have been drawn together by a combination of circumstances and in order to accomplish their individual goals. This is not a foundation on which to build a long-lasting and mutually-beneficial relationship as those circumstances or goals could easily change. It would be interesting to see how the relationship evolves over time – if, indeed, it does, or if it even lasts at all.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual author, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

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