



Russian Declarations Regarding Removal of Foreign Forces from Syria Encounter Greater Criticism in Iran

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May 22, 2018

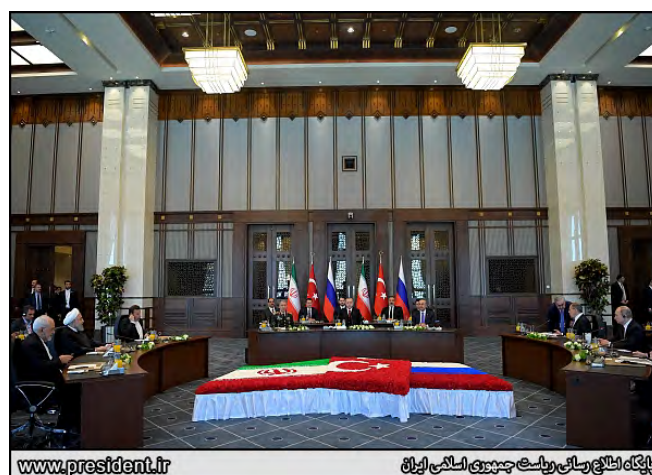
Main Argument

► **The statements made by the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and his Presidential Envoy to Syria, Alexander Laverentiev, calling on foreign forces, including those of Iran and Hezbollah, to depart Syria, have been met with a sharp rebuke in Iran toward Russia.** On May 17, 2018, the Russian president met with the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, at the Sochi retreat. Following the meeting, President Putin declared that progress in the settlement process in Syria should accelerate the withdrawal of foreign forces from Syria. The day following the meeting, Putin's presidential envoy to Syria clarified that the Russian president referred to all foreign forces in Syria, including Iranian, Hezbollah, Turkish and American troops. Laverentiev emphasized that Putin's statement is a "political message," but added that it should not be seen as the beginning of a withdrawal process of foreign forces from the country. He added that such a withdrawal is a very complicated matter, since these steps need to be implemented alongside and as part of a stabilization process of the region (Interfax, May 28, 2018).

In an initial response to the Russian statements, the **Spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bahram Qasemi**, stated that no one can force Iran to do anything. According to him, **Iran will remain in Syria as long as the terrorist threat is present there and as long as the Syrian government is interested in Iran's presence.** During his weekly press conference, Qasemi asserted that those who must leave Syria are those who entered it without the approval of the Syrian government, referring to Turkey and the United States (Tasnim, May 21, 2018).

► The statements by Russian officials aroused sharp and extraordinary critiques in the Iranian press. Commentaries published in recent days in Iran argued that Russia's latest statements provide further proof that **Russia can not be trusted, as it is always willing to sacrificed Iran at the service of its interests.** The commentaries argued that Russia recently agreed to Israeli requests not to hinder Israel's operations against Iranian targets in Syria, as

long as this is done in coordination with Moscow. Iranian media buttressed the claim regarding the change in Russia's policies by pointing to the Kremlin's silence following the strikes carried out by Israel on the night of May 10, 2018, against dozens of Iranian targets in Syria in response to a rocket attack on IDF positions in the Golan Heights.



The summit of the Iranian, Russian and Turkish presidents in Moscow (the website of the Iranian president, April 4, 2018)

► In recent days, alongside the denunciations of Russia's statements regarding the Syrian issue, criticism has emerged in Tehran **concerning Russia's policy with regards to the future of the nuclear accord following the announcement of President Trump on the United States' withdrawal from the agreement.** On May 15, 2018, the **Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Ribakov**, was quoted as saying that it would be impossible to maintain the nuclear accord without concessions from Tehran (Reuters, May 15, 2018). Shortly after the publication of the report, it became apparent that the report was based on a mistaken translation and that the deputy foreign minister was in fact referring to the American attempt to incorporate a requirement for Iranian concessions. However, at this point, Ribakov's misreported statements had already aroused sharp criticism and increased the sense of distrust toward the Kremlin.

► **The disapproval in Iran with regards to Russia's policies is not new and is rooted in a deep historical distrust toward Russia and its regional ambitions.** Over the past year, similarly to previous periods, Iranian media published commentaries critical of Russia, which argued that Russia's policy in Syria is ignoring vital Iranian interests.¹ This critique was voiced

¹ For more on this, see the publication of the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center "Iranian Concerns Grow Over Russia's Syrian Policies" http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/Data/articles/Art_21129/E_009_17_360644559.pdf

despite the ongoing military cooperation between Iran and Russia in Syria and the continuous political coordination between Iranian and Russian senior officials concerning the political developments and negotiations in Syria.

► The intensification in criticism of Russia in recent days reflects a growing Iranian dissatisfaction with Russia's conduct in the Syrian arena and **apprehensions regarding Moscow's future intentions**. The disagreements between the two countries **stem from the desire of both countries to increase their influence and even obtain a hegemonic status in Syria and due to a different approach regarding relations with regional players, including Israel**. Iran did encourage the direct Russian intervention in Syria to rescue the Assad regime, but as a result, Tehran lost its hegemon status and has had to accept a secondary role, at times, in the military and political developments in the country.

As long as the civil war in Syria continued to rage with full force, the military and political cooperation between Iran and Russia could be sustained based on shared interests, which are preventing Syria's fall in the hands of the rebels and guarding against Western influence in Syria. But the progress in the negotiations concerning the end of the war and the stabilization of the Assad regime **are increasing the likelihood of growing tensions between the two countries**. Iran, which supports maintaining Syria's territorial integrity and Assad's rule, is opposed to Russia's policy of establishing a loose federation in Syria. **Iran is determined, at least for the time being, to persist in its efforts to establish a long-term military foothold in Syria, alongside political and economic influence.**

► At this stage, Russia still recognizes the necessity of Iran's involvement and that of the Shi'ite militias operating under Tehran's patronage in Syria, as the military campaign has not been decisively won yet. However, the statements by senior Russian officials repeatedly indicate that **Russia sees no justification for a permanent Iranian military presence in Syria**. In addition, Moscow is aware of the fact that **the presence of Iran and its proxies in Syria is creating growing tensions with Israel, to the point of direct confrontations between Iran and Israel, threatening the gains made by the Assad regime and jeopardizing the negotiations' process to end the war**. We therefore assess that discord between Iran and Russia may grow even further as the negotiations to end the war progress,

see the publication from February 18, 2018 "Major Challenges Faced by Iran in the Regional Arena in 2018" <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/major-challenges-faced-iran-regional-arena-2018/>

which will determine the fate of President Assad, and as Moscow recognizes that stabilizing the situation in Syria requires reducing Iranian presence in the country.

Appendix I

Commentaries Critical of Russia in Iranian Press

- ▶ On May 15, 2018, the website Tabnak published an analysis arguing that the statement of the Russian deputy minister of foreign affairs according to which Iran will be required to make concessions to preserve the nuclear accord is the first testament to a change in Russia's policy toward Iran. The website blamed Russia for "playing the Iranian card" to extract concessions from both Iran and Western countries. The analysis called on Tehran to remain resolute against the Russian efforts to extract additional concessions from Iran.
- ▶ This article was published only days after another commentary, published in Tabnak, warned about a change in Russia's policy toward Iran following the United States' retreat from the nuclear deal. The article, penned by Mostafa Najjafi (May 12, 2018) argued that Russia previously supported United Nations Security Council resolutions to levy sanctions on Iran or at the very least, abstained from using its veto power at the Security Council. Now that Iran needs international diplomatic support to fight against the unilateral policy of President Trump, Russia may again use the "Iranian card" for its benefit and change its policies.
- ▶ According to the commentator, the change in Russia's policies is evident in the declaration of the Russian deputy minister of foreign affairs according to which Moscow would be willing to add an annex to the nuclear agreement; in reports about Russia's willingness not to inhibit Israeli action against Iranian positions in Syria as long as this is done in coordination with Moscow; and in the Kremlin's refusal to provide the Syrian regime with the S-300 air defense system following the visit of the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Moscow on May 9.
- ▶ On May 17, the reformist Iranian newspaper Ebtakar published a commentary calling on Iran's leadership to prioritize bolstering cooperation with Europe over Russia. The article argued that Russia is only concerned with its own interests, does not desire to see an improvement of relations between Iran and the West and does not consider itself to be Tehran's friend. The commentary asserted that Russia previously adopted unacceptable positions vis-à-vis Iran, for example: by delaying the construction of the nuclear reactor in Bushehr and the provision of air defense systems to Iran, Russia's support for international sanctions against Iran, and the ongoing cooperation between Russia and Israel, even after the Israeli strikes in Syria.

Now that the United States has withdrawn from the JCPOA, Russia again wishes to extract concessions from Iran to bolster its standing and promote its interests, the article argued. Russia may even use Prime Minister Netanyahu as a mediator to improve its relations with the United States. This means that after the chaos created by President Trump's withdrawal from the agreement, Russia can not be expected to stand by Iran. This is opposed to the European states, which are interested in preserving their "political identity" vis-à-vis the United States.



The Rouhani-Putin Meeting in Tehran (Mehr, November 1, 2017)

- ▶ On May 19, the Tabnak website published yet another opinion article, in which he labeled the statement of the President Vladimir Putin's Envoy to Syria, Laverentiev, regarding the future of the presence of foreign forces in Syria as "the Russians' game in the field of Israel and America." The commentary argued that after Putin's issued a statement during his meeting with the Syrian president in Sochi, some of Russia's supporters believed that Putin did not refer to the presence of Iranian or Hezbollah forces but only the American and Turkish forces. However, Laverentiev's statement clarified that Putin also referred to the presence of Iranian forces. The withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA increased, according to Tabnak, Iran's dependence on Russian support, and Moscow may exploit the newly created circumstances to demand from Iran addition concessions in Syria and on other matters.
- ▶ On May 19, the website Fararu published an analytical article by the political commentator Ali Bigdeli, which referred to the deep mistrust among Iranians toward Russia, which stems from Russia's dealings with Iran over the past 200 years, which include: Russia's military intervention in Iran, Russia's support for separatists in Iran during the first and second world wars, Russia's refusal to withdraw its forces from Iran following World War II, the USSR's

support for the Iranian communist party, as well as its backing of Iraq during the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq in the 1980s. Russia's hostile policy toward Iran persisted even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and manifested, among other ways, by the dispute over the Caspian Sea and exploitation of its oil resources, the delays in provision of the S-300 air defense system to Iran and Russia's support for imposing economic sanctions on Tehran.

► The article included a statement by the former Iranian diplomat, Ali Khoram, who averred that Russia can not be trusted, as it is proven in the past that it is undeserving of trust by Iran. Russia does not stand by Iran, especially due to the pressure it faces from the United States and Israel. According to Khoram, Russia would prefer to "sacrifice" Iran to deliver the concessions it is asked to make by the United States.

► On May 20, the reformist E'temaad daily published an opinion piece by Ardeshir Sanaei. The op-ed argued that Moscow is extremely concerned by the growing escalation between Iran and Israel, which may endanger the negotiations and stabilization process in Syria and open a new military front in Syria. Putin and his advisers believe that they can prevent a new military confrontation in Syria with a plan to remove foreign forces from Syria. This does not mean marginalizing Iran in the political negotiations in Syria or forcing a distancing between President Assad and Tehran, but merely a reduction in Iran's military presence, which created tensions between Iran and Israel. The writer asserted that if tensions between Iran and Israel persist, the Russians may be forced to make a choice between Tehran and Tel Aviv to prevent a new crisis in Syria. Iran and Russia need each other in Syria, and play a complementary role despite their disagreements, and they can not make decisions regarding Syria's future without coordination with each other. However, Iran may be asked to reduce its military presence in Syria.

Appendix II

Developments in Iranian-Russian Cooperation in Recent Months

- ▶ In recent months, cooperation between Iran and Russia surrounding the ongoing campaign in Syria has persisted. In mid-April 2018, Hezbollah's al-Mayadeen network reported that Iran acceded to Russia's request to again use the air force base in Hamedan, western Iran, to refuel Russian jets utilized to carry out airstrikes in Syria (al-Mayadeen, April 13, 2018). In August 2016, Russian jets used the Hamedan to strike targets in Syria, arousing a significant backlash in Iran, which resulted in an end to this use of the air base. However, Iranian officials stated at the time that they will allow the Russians to use the military air base in the future, according to operational needs.
- ▶ On April 13, the reporter of the Tasnim News Agency (affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, IRGC) tweeted that the Russian request to again utilize the base was passed to the Secretary General of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, during a visit to Tehran of President Putin's Envoy to Syria, Alexander Laverentiev. The visit was conducted following the Israeli strike on the T-4 base near the city of Palmyra on April 8, in which seven IRGC personnel, including a senior officer in the unmanned aerial vehicle program was killed, and ahead of the strikes carried out by the United States, the United Kingdom and France against chemical weapons targets in Syria, in response to the chemical attack perpetrated by the Assad regime against Douma.
- ▶ Despite the military cooperation between the two countries, Moscow has made it clear on several occasions over the past year that Iranian forces would have to leave Syria after a conclusive victory in the battlefield is achieved. In February 2018, the Russian Ambassador to Iran, Levan Dzhagaryan, stated in an interview to the Interfax News Agency (February 5), that all foreign forces in Syria, including Iranian troops, would have to leave Syria after the final defeat of the terrorists. He mentioned that the spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also stated recently that Iran's "military advisers" will leave Syria, in accordance with the permission of the Syrian government, then their mission ends.
- ▶ Meanwhile, Russia and Iran continue to hold constant deliberations regarding developments in Syria in meetings between senior as well as mid-level officials. On April 4, 2018, the presidents of Iran, Russia and Turkey met in Ankara to discuss Syria. At the end of the summit, the three presidents agreed to meet again soon in Tehran. In parallel, the Iranian

Minister of Defense, Amir Hatami, visited Russia to participate in the Moscow Conference on International Security. During his visit, he met with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Shoygu, and discussed bilateral relations between Russia and Iran and regional coordination between the two countries.



**Iranian Minister of Defense Hatami in Moscow
(IRNA, April 4, 2018)**

► On April 10, 2018, the Adviser on Political Affairs to the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hossein Jaber Ansari, met in Tehran with the Special Envoy of the Russian President on Syria, Alexander Laverentiev. Ansari stated that developments in Syria necessitate closer coordination between the two countries. Representatives from the ministries of defense of the two countries also took part in the meeting. During his unplanned visit to Tehran, Laverentiev also met with the Secretary General of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, and discussed developments in Syria with him, and in particular the strike attributed to Israel on the T-4 Base, and U.S. threats to bomb Syria in response to the chemical weapons use by the Syrian Army (ISNA, April 10, 2018).



The meeting between Ali Shamkhani and the Presidential Envoy on Syria, Laverentiev (Tasnim, April 11, 2018)

- At the end of April, Ali Shamkhani, the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, visited Sochi and met with secretary of the Russian National Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev. The two officials discussed developments in Syria and the future of the nuclear accord (Fars, April 24, 2018).