

# New Realities in the Middle East: Russian-Iranian Cooperation after the Zeitenwende

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The Middle East is changing. Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023 shocked the country deeply and shook Israel's self-confidence with regards to its own security. The security situation at the Lebanese border remains volatile, while the Houthi drone and rocket attacks from Yemen on October 31, 2023 highlight the danger of an escalation on yet another front. Iranian attacks on US bases in Iraq and Syria underline this danger.

Europe is faced with a dilemma, as policies towards Russia and the Middle East must be coordinated with one another. The ever-closer collaboration between Russia and Iran exemplifies this need. Yet a strategic coordination also bears risks: Containing both Russia and Iran at the same time bolsters the two states' tendency to collaborate even further.

In confronting this dilemma, different priorities become apparent. US and European policy towards Iran since February 2022 aimed to stop Iran from crossing further red lines, such as the delivery of rockets to Russia. Their policies towards Russia follow a similar logic. Russia has not yet crossed all red lines in the Middle East. For instance, Russia could ally itself even more closely with Iran in Syria or in the nuclear field. Several developments since October 2023 point in this direction.

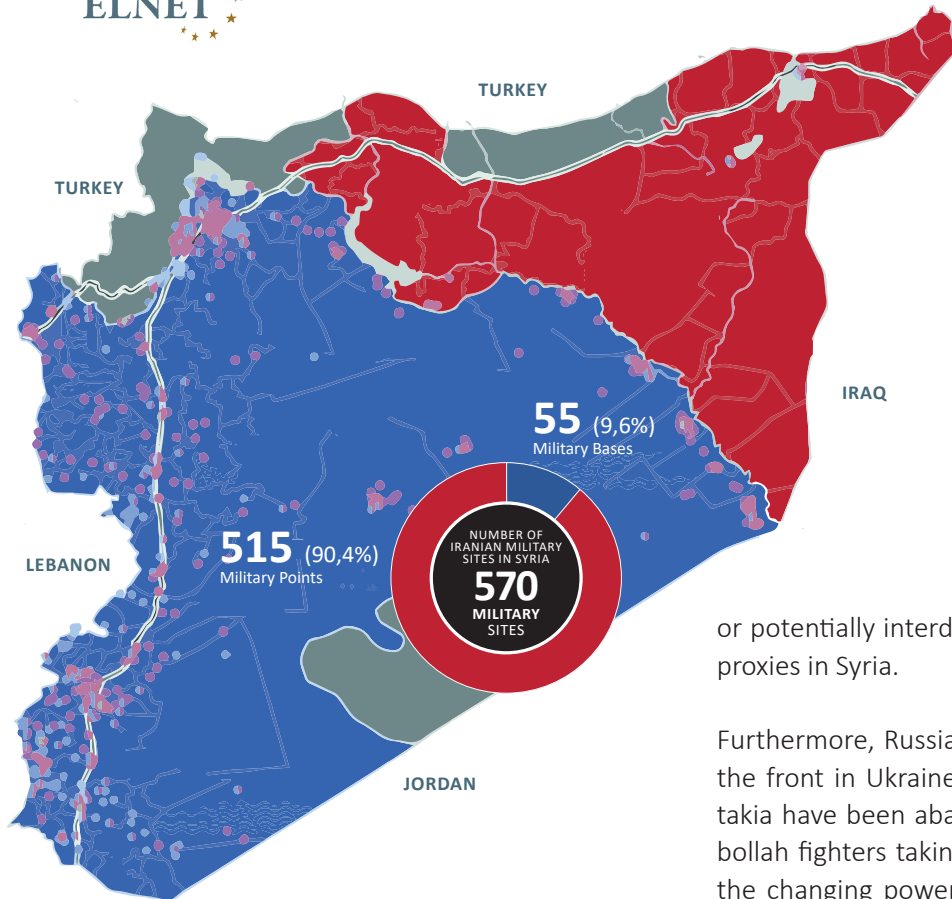
Collaboration between Russia and Iran is developing in the context of significant changes in the regional balance of power in the Middle East. The Russian footprint in the region has changed as a consequence of the Russian war against Ukraine. Simultaneously, the region has become less of a priority in American foreign policy. These developments lead to a power vacuum that countries like Iran or China seek to fill.

With its facilitation of the diplomatic normalization between Iran and Saudi-Arabia, China can point to a first success in the region.<sup>1</sup> Yet this new vacuum also constitutes an opportunity for Europe to play a constructive role in the Middle East.

The new alliance between Russia and Iran bears great strategic importance for both countries. Nevertheless, it is not universally popular in Iran. Pointing to the centuries-old rivalry with Russia,<sup>2</sup> some Iranian commentators warn against too close ties with Russia. Against this background, some Western commentators point to the possibility of containing the Russian-Iranian alliance.<sup>3</sup>

## The Russian War against Ukraine: An Opportunity for Iran in Syria

In Syria, the ongoing changes in the regional balance of power have immediate effects. Some 18 months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the question remains to what extent the Russian presence in the Middle East will be affected by the war in Ukraine. Shortly after the invasion, Russia redeployed a Sukhoi-25 squadron from Syria.<sup>4</sup> In October 2022, Russia decided to move an S-300 missile system from Masyaf in the Northwest of Syria to Crimea.<sup>5/6</sup> While Russia previously prevented any Iranian involvement in Syrian air defenses, the past months have shown increasing collaboration in this area as well. Russia and Iran now work together closely regarding radar and telecommunication matters in Syria.<sup>7</sup> Almost a month after the Hamas attack on Israel, it was reported that the Wagner group will supply Hezbollah, an Iranian proxy, with Russian SA-22 air defense systems.<sup>8</sup> This poses a direct danger to Israel by complicating



## IRANIAN MILITARY SITES IN SYRIA

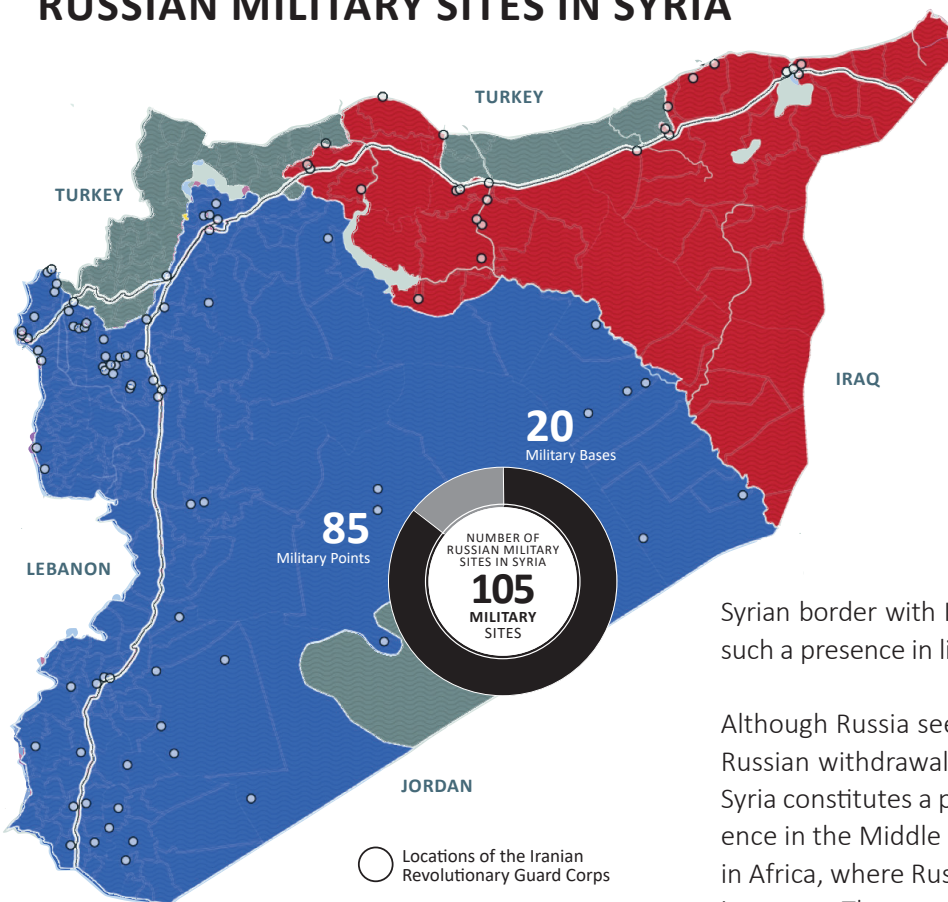
- OPPOSITION-CONTROLLED AREAS
- REGIME-CONTROLLED AREAS
- SDF-CONTROLLED AREAS

- Locations of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
- Locations of the Lebanese Hezbollah forces
- Joint stationing sites between the Iranian Revolutionary Guards & the Lebanese Hezbollah

or potentially interdicting Israeli air strikes against Iranian proxies in Syria.

Furthermore, Russia has redeployed troops from Syria to the front in Ukraine.<sup>9</sup> Parts of the Syrian province of Latakia have been abandoned by Russian troops, with Hezbollah fighters taking their place.<sup>10</sup> These examples show the changing power dynamics between Russia and Iran. Increasingly, Iran is becoming more than just a junior ally.

## RUSSIAN MILITARY SITES IN SYRIA



- Locations of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps

In addition, since July 2023, Russia, Iran, and other forces present in Syria act increasingly aggressively against US forces. American troops (around 900 soldiers) are deployed in Syria's East near the Euphrates to support the campaign against the Islamic State as part of Operation Inherent Resolve. The coordinated activities include additional Iranian and Syrian ground troops that cooperate closely with the Russian air force.<sup>11</sup>

Since October 7, 2023, Russia has crossed further Israeli red lines by allowing Iranian proxies to be present on the Syrian border with Israel. Until then, Russia had prevented such a presence in line with Israeli requests.<sup>12</sup>

Although Russia seems to conserve its power, a complete Russian withdrawal from Syria seems unlikely. For Russia, Syria constitutes a platform for projecting power and influence in the Middle East and a logistical hub for operations in Africa, where Russia has massive economic and political interests. These advantages require a relatively modest presence compared with the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Unofficial figures of the Russian presence before February 2022 estimated between 5,000<sup>13</sup> and 13,000<sup>14</sup> troops. However, it is likely that the Russian presence will be reduced in the medium term and be more dependent on cooperation with Iran. By contrast, Iran is increasing its presence in Syria, especially in the East. Since September 2023, Iran has been building its largest military base outside its own borders near the city of Mayadin on the Euphrates river.<sup>15</sup>

### Armaments Cooperation between Iran and Russia

Since the end of August 2022, the Russian military has been using Iranian UAVs in the war against Ukraine. New factories in Belarus (Homyel) and Russia (province Tatarstan) will build these drones in the future.<sup>16</sup>

On October 18, 2023, the “Transition Day” of the nuclear deal with Iran (JCPOA), several restrictions of both the JCPOA and UN resolution 2231 (passed to accompany the JCPOA) ended. These included restrictions on arms exports, meaning that Iran could for instance now provide Russia with missiles. The export of UAVs under 500kg “pay load” and 300km range was already permitted before Transition Day. However, Germany and its allies transferred the restrictions into their national sanctions catalogues. Here too, the security dilemma vis-à-vis Russia and Iran becomes apparent: alienating them too much must be avoided to prevent the two states from crossing further red lines in their cooperation with each other.

The delivery of Russian Sukhoi-35 fighter jets to Iran that was officially announced in March 2023 constitutes another potential area of cooperation between the two countries. However, reports in July 2023 suggested that the delivery would not go ahead as planned.<sup>17</sup> The exact backgrounds are not known. Possible reasons could be quality issues of the Russian arms industry, Russian reluctance to transfer technology to Iran, or an Israeli request asking Russia to cancel the delivery.<sup>18</sup>

Potential collaboration in the development and construction of launch vehicles for nuclear weapons poses another concern. In April 2023, reports emerged about Iranian negotiations with Russia and China about the purchase of ammonium perchlorate. The substance can be used to build solid-propellant rockets; its export to Iran is not permitted without the explicit

approval of the UN Security Council according to UN resolution 2231.<sup>19</sup> In this case, too, Russia and China must be prevented urgently from taking such steps.

### Russia’s Role in the Nuclear Negotiations with Iran

Concerning the JCPOA, the triangular relationship between Russia, Iran, and the West has become even more complex since February 2022. Russia used to be an important partner in negotiating the deal. Iran was supposed to hand over enriched uranium to Russia in excess of the limit set by the JCPOA. The Russian attack on Ukraine makes it unlikely to successfully negotiate a new nuclear deal with Iran.

Over the past one and a half years, the talks with Iran have focused on small-scale compromises. This includes an agreement reached in June 2023 between the US and Iran on a prisoner exchange and Iranian access to six billion US-dollars frozen by South Korea. However, shortly after the Hamas attack on Israel, the USA and Qatar announced that the money will remain frozen until further notice.<sup>20</sup>

In this respect, too, the European and US approach is guided by the described security dilemma. Faced with the Russian attack on Ukraine, negotiations with Iran are seen as a way of undercutting Iranian support for Russia. In August 2023, reports suggested that the US approach to an informal agreement with Iran aimed to stop Iranian UAV deliveries to Russia.<sup>21</sup> However, this restricts the West’s freedom of action in pursuing a stringent Middle East policy.

Experts assume that Germany, France, and the UK are keeping their options open to reinstate sanctions against Iran in case it provides ballistic missiles to Russia (“snap back”).<sup>22</sup> Even after Transition Day, the European partners of the deal consider it necessary to offer Iran concessions for not crossing further red lines vis-à-vis Russia. Israel’s security situation on the other hand leads to the opposite policy objective of keeping Russia supporting Iran even further.

### Economic Cooperation: A New Dimension of the Alliance

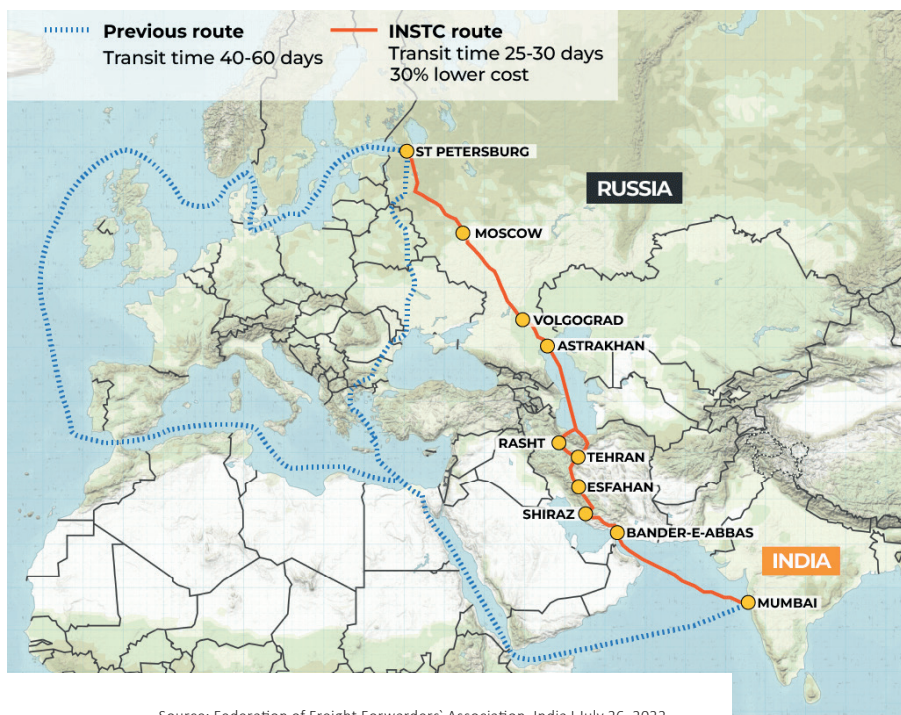
At the same time, Russia’s financial ability for a proactive policy towards the Middle East has changed. Mo-

scow has already been forced to limit aid deliveries to Syria.<sup>23</sup> Unlike in the military sector, Iran is not able to take on Russia’s role in this sphere. This provides a potential opportunity for China.

Under the current circumstances, the Russian leadership must set financial priorities. Therefore, Russian policy towards the region focuses on projects that prioritize Russia’s own economic interests. Together with India, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, Russia and Iran are pursuing the creation of an International North-South Transport Corridor. This corridor is supposed to connect Russia and Iran through the Caspian Sea and by rail routes crossing Azerbaijan.<sup>24</sup> Until the end of 2023, a free trade zone between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union will be established.<sup>25</sup> This is another reason why Iran is becoming increasingly relevant for Russia, especially with regards to evading sanctions.

According to official figures, Russia will invest the equivalent of 3.5 billion US dollars in the North-South Corridor. The true costs are likely to be significantly higher.<sup>26</sup> These investments will influence Russian policy towards Iran for decades to come. The Russian interest in an economically prosperous Iran and sanction relief will only increase.

## INTERNATIONAL NORTH-SOUTH TRANSPORT CORRIDOR



## Summary

Europe and the Middle East are facing security challenges that seemed impossible in the last decades. Russia and Iran pose the greatest security threats in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, respectively. For Europe, dealing with the Russian threat has been the highest policy priority since February 2022. For Israel and the majority of Arab states in the Middle East, this priority is Iran. Yet both Europe and the Middle East are dependent on partners in the other region. For this reason, a constant dialogue about the handling of the threats is crucial. Both sides must be aware of security requirements of the other and, whenever possible, must act in a coordinated manner.

Both sides should try to formulate a common strategy of containment vis-à-vis Russia and Iran. Here, it has to be considered that Europe must remain able to prevent Iran from additional steps that aid Russia’s attack on Ukraine. This consideration will restrict European measures against Iran in the foreseeable future. At the same time, Israel will emphasize the necessity to prevent further Russian arms deliveries to Iran. However, the changing situation in Syria may lead Israel to partly abandon its restraint towards Russia. This situation has become even more dynamic in the aftermath of the attacks on October 7, 2023. A strategy of mutual support can be one part of a successful containment strategy of Russia and Iran that does not preclude taking nuanced approaches with regards to specific issues. Additionally, the increasing development of political blocs between the two states (and other actors) must not be further encouraged.

*The INSTC could offer Russia an economic escape route to Asia at a time when sanctions are limiting its transit access through most of Europe.*

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