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The Iran-Russia axis: tactical interests and implications for Yemen

The tactical alignment between Iran and Russia has become evident since the beginning of Russian airstrikes in Syria, as well as in Iraqi politics. On the contrary, mainstream analysis have neglected the impact of the Teheran-Moscow axis on the conflict in Yemen so far.

Traditionally, Iranian-Russian relations are about mutual containment in areas of common projection and influence, as the Caspian region and Southern Asia (Afghanistan). The opposition to the “Washington consensus” in international relations is a point of agreement between Teheran and Moscow. Their main domains of cooperation are trade, energy, security. Russian defense industry represents an interesting procurement source for Iran after the sanctions. Iran, Russia and Azerbaijan have just revived talks on the North-South Transport Corridor and its connected railway. Iran joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as observer in 2005, even though its future membership remains a contested topic.

Nowadays, Iran and Russia sustain Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria, but their positions with regard to the future of the al-Assad family and the Alawites can’t be overlapped: differently from Moscow, the Iranian support to the current Syrian regime is a strategic choice, not a tactical one, with an eye to the Lebanese Hezbollah’s survival. For the first time since 1979, the Islamic Republic has allowed a foreign power, Russia in this case, to use an Iranian airbase (Hamadan) for strikes on Syria. Notwithstanding the axis with Teheran, Moscow has managed to secure good relations with Israel so far.

Geopolitical interests between Iran and Russia are complex, sometimes conflicting: the Nagorno-Karabakh issue is a sensitive file still unsolved, while both countries aim at preventing the spread of instability and jihadism among Central Asian republics, especially now that they are going to cross demanding political transitions, first of all the post-Karimov’s Uzbekistan.

The Iran-Russia axis has political implications for Yemen, where Teheran supports the Shia faction (the Northern Zaydi Shia Huthis of Ansarullah, plus loyalists of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh), against the recognized government, backed by Saudi Arabia.

In the Yemeni conflict, Russia has chosen a neutral stance, even though its diplomatic actions have often saved the Shia front from further international pressure.

On April 2015, Russia was the only Security Council's permanent member to abstain on resolution 2216, which requested that the Shia rebels' withdraw from occupied areas (including the capital Sana'a) and that they relinquish of all arms seized from military and security institutions. Resolution 2216 has always been the basis for UN-led negotiations. On August 2016, Russia stopped a resolution project whose goal was to condemn the establishment by Huthis and Saleh's loyalists of a political committee to rule Yemen: the Shia rebels' initiative heavily contributed to the derail of the third round of diplomatic talks in Kuwait.

Moscow wants to increase its leverage in Middle Eastern politics and also shares with Teheran the concern about criminal-terroristic networks spreading in the region. In spite of public equidistance among warring parties, Russia's *de facto* alignment with Iran in the Yemeni conflict (Riyadh's courtyards) risks to complicate Saudi-Russian cooperation, especially in the security domain.

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