

# Analysis There's a New Alliance in the Middle East

Russia, the United States and Israel are uniting against Iran, making it clear to Bashar Assad who will determine the future of the region.



Smoke and fire following reported Syrian government forces' bombardment on the town of Khan Sheikhun, Idlib, June 6, 2019. AFP

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"The world is watching this butchery. What is the purpose, what will it get you? STOP!" tweeted President Trump, as though he were a human rights activist or a frustrated neutral observer, rather than the leader of the world's most powerful superpower.

By "butchery," Trump meant the increasing Syrian and Russian attacks on the Idlib province in Syria, where at least 232 people, some 60 of them children, were killed in recent weeks. Hundreds were wounded, dozens of clinics and hospitals were wiped out and hundreds of houses were pulverized. More than 3,000 people fled the area in May alone.

skip - Trump tweet



*Donald J. Trump@realDonaldTrump*

*Hearing word that Russia, Syria and, to a lesser extent, Iran, are bombing the hell out of Idlib Province in Syria, and indiscriminately killing many innocent civilians. The World is watching this butchery. What is the purpose, what will it get you? STOP!*

In terms, this is a local battle and the number of victims pales in comparison with the horrendous, total numbers. But the campaign in Idlib, home to 3 million people, developed into an international conflict involving Russia and Turkey as well as Syria.

This is the rebels' last significant bastion and its capture is necessary to complete Assad's control of the state. Pockets of resistance remain in Hama and the south of Syria, but the most difficult challenge is the rebels' main force, some 50,000 combatants affiliated with dozens of militias, the largest of which is a descendant of the Islamist Jabhat al-Nusra.

The big campaign against Idlib, already planned a year ago, hasn't actually begun. In the last few days, Syrian army forces have taken over villages while Russian planes struck intensively, but these are just the opening shots, intended to pressure rebels, along with Turkey, to choose negotiations over mass killing. If the battles continue, a new mass wave of refugees is expected to enter Turkey and join the 3.5 million refugees already there.

Turkey and Russia agreed in September 2018 that Turkey would drive out the armed rebels and clear the region of heavy weapons, effectively handing over the province to Assad's control, or at least turning it into a kind of security zone under Turkish and Russian supervision. But Turkey failed in its mission, and the rebel militias refused to lay down their arms.



Russian President Vladimir Putin, shakes hands with Syrian President Bashar Assad during a meeting in Sochi, Russia, May 17, 2018. Mikhail Klimentyev, AP

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The campaign on Idlib is holding up Russia's plans to draft a new constitution for Syria, hold elections, stabilize the government and begin the country's rehabilitation.

But Russia has no intention of simply returning Syria to Assad's control. It sees Syria as leverage to furthering its hold in the Middle East. This consists of building bridges with Saudi Arabia and the United Emirates, forging an economic alliance with Egypt while giving it military assistance, getting rid of American and European sanctions and bolstering its status in the world.

These Russian aspirations, however, are not compatible with Iran's. Iran sees Syria not only as a strategic outpost that will preserve Iran's influence in Lebanon, but as a regional outpost to counterbalance Saudi Arabia's ambitions. This outpost will open pathways for Iran into the Mediterranean and complement

the alliances it has forged with Iraq and Turkey. This is viewed as a strategic threat not only to Israel and the United States, but to Russia as well.

Recent local clashes between pro-Iranian militias and Russian-sponsored militias indicate that Russia is acting to thwart the Iranian threat. On the face of it, these are local incidents, but on a bigger scale, Russia is training and arming local militias through private Russian companies. The combatants wear Russian uniforms and use Russian weapons. Russia has also ordered Assad to fire pro-Iranian officers and soldiers while Russian officers have taken command of some Syrian army units.

Iran was painfully slapped in the face twice by Russia. Once, when Russia turned down its request to buy S-400 anti-aircraft missiles, and a second time when Russia continues to enable Israel to attack Iranian targets in Syria.

The Kremlin spokesman declared that the “distorted reports on the issue” must be treated cautiously, but Russian research analysts told journalists that Russia sees selling S-400 missile systems to Iran as “a threat to the region’s stability.”

For Iran, this is a message that Russia will not stand by its side if it is attacked by the United States or Israel, and moreover, that Russia has an interest in keeping Iran in isolation. This assumption is shared by Western observers, who say Russia’s support for Iran’s decision to reduce its commitment to the nuclear agreement stems from its desire to keep up tensions between Iran and the United States, as part of its strategic game as Europe’s exclusive oil provider.



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan at a meeting in Moscow, April 8 ,2019.Alexei Nikolsky,AP

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Two days after Iran notified the signatory states of its decision to reduce commitments to the agreement, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared that the move was “inconceivable.” But a few days later, Lavrov justified Iran’s decision in a joint news conference with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and said that the United States had made Iran take this step.

Recently, when Trump spoke again of his desire to negotiate with Iran with no

preconditions, Iran rejected the overture while Russia remained silent. Removing the sanctions from Iran or alleviating them is not in Moscow's interest, because when the nuclear agreement came into effect, they worriedly watched how European countries set to diversify their oil sources away from Russia.

There were plans at the time to build an oil pipeline from Iran to Europe via Turkey, and part of it was already built. At the same time, a gas pipeline was completed between Russia and Turkey, meaning Russia was leading in the race. If the sanctions are lifted and Iran becomes a player in the oil market again, Russia may lose a chunk of the European market.

The meeting of Israel's, Russia's and the United States' interests regarding Iran generated the idea for a summit of national security advisors, to take place in Israel this month. According to unconfirmed sources, Russia expects the United States to recognize Assad's regime and lift sanctions. In exchange, Russia will act to drive Iran out of Syria.

This is an unusual meeting, in which the three national security advisors, Meir Ben-Shabbat, John Bolton and Nikolai Patrushev, will discuss regional developments as equal partners. Such a summit, even if it doesn't yield immediate concrete results, conveys to Iran and the region that the Russian-American-Israeli axis could be the one to draft the new Middle East roadmap.

But immediate military and diplomatic results could be overambitious. Lavrov made it clear recently that expecting Russia to bloc Iran's forces in Syria was "unrealistic." Russia also failed to keep its promise to keep Iran's forces more than 80 kilometers away from Israel's border in the Golan Heights, and there are doubts whether it can make Iran withdraw at this stage.

About six months ago, journalist Barak Ravid reported on Channel 13 that Patrushev had proposed to Ben Shabbat, in an unofficial document, that Russia will bring about Iran's withdrawal from Syria in exchange for lifting of sanctions by the United States. Israel rejected the proposal and the sanctions were imposed in full.



Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Iran welcomes Syrian President Bashar Assad in Tehran, Iran, February 25, 2019.,AP

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If the United States decides to alleviate or revoke sanctions, it will do so in exchange for renewed negotiations with Iran and a new nuclear agreement. It will not settle for an Iranian withdrawal from Syria.

Another option is to pressure Assad to get Iran's forces out of Syria, because he's the one who invited them in, and Iran will find it hard to stay if they're unwelcomed. In return, Assad may receive American recognition of his regime and an Israeli promise not to attack in Syria after the Iranian forces' departure. He may also receive a Saudi commitment to take part in funding Syria's rehabilitation along with Russian strategic backing. These are much more than Iran can give him.

Assad's problem is that if he agrees to drive Iran's forces out he will have to explain to Iran why it's them and not Russia. Assad will also have to rely on the United States, Israel and Russia, which have repeatedly stated that their interest in Syria is not reserved for one person. In other words, Assad can also go.

Iran, on the other hand, supported him all the way, gave him credit lines and \$6-8 billion in assistance. Iran was there for Assad long before the war started. But he doesn't have to decide who to choose yet. The war isn't over and no American temptation has yet been offered. But the moment is approaching, and Assad will have to decide.



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