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## RUSSIA, IRAN AND TURKEY, a common strategy in Syria?

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Russia, Iran and Turkey form an unexpected, complex and fragile alliance in Syria. Their positions on key issues such as Bashar al-Assad's continuation, the country's territorial integrity, the role of other local and regional actors, and the distribution of reconstruction contracts either differ or are ambiguous in their agreement. But the options for resolving the war in its present phase rest to a large extent on the interaction between Moscow, Ankara and Tehran and their agenda. The three capitals have encouraged the so-called Astana process, a parallel forum that dilutes the UN-backed dialogue in Geneva when it doesn't annul it. In addition, since November 2017, presidents Putin, Rouhani and Erdoğan have held a series of trilateral meetings – in Sochi, Ankara and soon in Tehran – to give this odd "Sochi trio" even more of the limelight.

Russia is the Assad regime's great buttress and the main catalyst of the diplomatic activity intended to achieve an agreement that allows the political process to be started and the country to be rebuilt. Damascus's dependence on Iran is no less. Tehran not only supplies troops, it also basically keeps the Syrian

economy afloat through its trade relations. Turkey, for its part, has militarily occupied the border areas under the control of the Kurdish YPG militias (People's Protection Units, the initials are Kurdish) and has consolidated an area of influence in the north of Syria. Peace as early as possible, but not at any price. That is one way to summarise the position of Russia, Iran and Turkey at this point of the Syrian war.

**The options for resolving the war in Syria rest to a large extent on the interaction between Moscow, Ankara and Tehran.**

**The Russian intervention in Syria, which takes advantage of the vacuum left by the United States and its European allies, has an instrumental nature that forms part of an approach that has greater regional and global scope.**

**Iranian exports to Syria have doubled in the past two years, making Iran its leading trade partner.**

**Tehran suspects that, despite being allies and maintaining good relation, its interests and those of Russia diverge on the Syrian issue.**

**The Kurdish issue has become a red line for Turkey not to cross.**

**Moscow has led the new agenda on Syria by starting conversations with all interested parties, prompting concern in both Ankara and Tehran.**

**The main challenge now facing the three actors has to do with the tensions and incidents between Iran and Israel.**

**In the cooperation between Russia, Iran and Turkey, the relationship of the participants is highly selective and asymmetric and there is no trust between them.**

### **Russia, geopolitical leadership à la Ryanair: profits and effectiveness at low cost**

Russia is in a hurry to resolve the Syria crisis. With its support for Assad and diplomatic leadership, the Kremlin has already achieved the objectives it set when beginning its intervention. Its current role allows it to savour a degree of leadership in the Middle East that was unthinkable until very recently. But the deterioration of the situation poses serious risks to the Russian position. Despite being well advertised and limited, and despite the tacit agreement between Washington and Moscow to avoid an escalation (not to mention the Israeli attacks on Iranian targets and Hezbollah

lah), the bombings of Syrian regime positions by the United States, France and the United Kingdom on April 14th could thwart Russian plans – which also rely on a fluid relationship with Israel – and drag it even deeper into a conflict in which it now has nothing more to gain.

On December 11th, after a stopover in Ankara to meet with his Turkish counterpart, President Vladimir Putin made a surprise visit to the Russian base of Khmeimim in the Syrian province of Latakia. Before his troops Putin hailed the mission's completion and (again) announced the "victorious return home" of the bulk of the forces deployed. The Russian leader was accompanied by the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, who played a notably subordinate role. Putin's journey concluded with a visit to Cairo to meet with President Sisi. This agenda was designed to symbolically represent Russia's success in Syria and its striking return to the region.

Moscow has achieved what it most craved, which was merely its recognition as an indispensable geopolitical actor. The intervention in Syria had and continues to have an instrumental and transactional nature and forms part of an approach that has wider regional and global reach. As the noted Russian expert, Dmitri Trenin, points out "Russia has signaled that it is returning to the global stage as a major independent geopolitical player". In other words, in the perception that

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dominates in Moscow, Russia is bursting into and altering the dynamic of a fixed international environment dominated by the United States that makes it feel not only uncomfortable but threatened. When it comes to Syria, the Kremlin has guaranteed the preservation and expansion of the naval base in Tartus and the Khmeimim airbase, strengthening not only its presence in the country but its projection capacity across the whole eastern Mediterranean. At the same time, and perhaps more important for Moscow, not only is Russia taking part in the diplomatic process, it is leading it, and its participation in any decision-making has become unavoidable. Thus, in the words of the Russian analyst Maxim A. Suchkov, on the Middle East Moscow is "consulted, heard and feared". The West refuses to accept this, in Moscow's view, which irretrievably muddies their relationship.

On September 28th 2015 President Putin gave a tough speech to the United Nations General Assembly in which he blamed the West for creating the Syrian crisis and the instability in the Middle East; he also proposed an international coalition to fight the Islamic State (IS) organisation and a national transition plan with the participation of Assad – who is, according to the Russian president, the only actor, along with the Kurdish militia, capable of fighting IS. This speech by Putin gives a fair summary of the Russian perception of regional events over the past 15 years and its principal milestones, three of which stand out: 1) the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which prompted intense concern in the Kremlin with regard to the United States and what it interpreted as unilateralism unconstrained by rules; 2) the Arab Springs – whether en-

visaged as the prelude to the inevitable taking of power by Islamist forces or as a covert coup d' état promoted by the West that would be nothing more than a continuation of the colour revolutions in the Eurasian space; and 3) the immediate and most obvious precedent – everything that took place in Libya, in particular the violation by France and the United Kingdom of the terms of Security Council Resolution 1973.

Barely two days after making this speech, the Russian military intervention in Syria began, going a step further than what, to that point, had been active diplomatic and political backing for the Bashar al-Assad regime. Russia bursting onto the scene completely changed the landscape of the war and the distribution of forces. The Russian contingent initially deployed was relatively small,<sup>1</sup> but consistent with the context of the conflict and, above all, with the initial aim of supporting the Assad regime and guaranteeing its survival, at least until an eventual negotiation. Hence, despite the anti-terrorist rhetoric, the first waves of Russian bombs targeted groups that were fighting the regime and not IS positions. According to the official Kremlin narrative, this intervention was justified by the fight against an IS that contained a considerable number of jihadists from the Russian Federation and the rest of the post-Soviet space (mainly north Caucasians and Central Asian migrants) detected since 2012. The baseline figures have oscillated, depending on the time and the source, but always range between 4,000 and 6,000 of the over 30,000 foreign fighters in IS ranks.

The Russian intervention took advantage of the vacuum left by the United States and its European allies. If anything became clear after the bombing with chemical weapons in various parts of Damascus in August 2013 it was Washington's reluctance to intervene in the Syrian conflict. That was as much the product of exhaustion after more than a decade of asymmetric conflicts in settings like Iraq and Afghanistan, as of the lack of certainty and trust generated by most of the groups opposing Assad, with the exception of the Kurds, who in turn represented a delicate issue in terms of relations with a NATO member such as Turkey. The start date of the intervention, as well as the rapid naval deployment of S-300 air defence systems (on board the ship Moskva) and the more advanced S-400, precisely reflect the desire to dissuade the West from a possible intervention against Assad. The establishment of this first "anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) bubble" protects the regime from the West, but it turned out to be irrelevant against the Syrian opposition and IS, neither of whom counted on significant air power.

In a similar way, the Kremlin has put a lot of effort into all the symbolic aspects of its intervention. Hence on the very day the operation started, Assad formally asked for assistance from Russia in accordance with the 1980 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. Obviously this was meant to emphasise the legitimacy of the Russian intervention from a strictly international law perspective in light of the absence of a United

1. 33 planes (12 Su-24s, 12 Su-25s, 4 Su-34s, 4 Su-30s and 1 Il-20), 17 helicopters (12 combat Mi-24s and five transport Mi-8s) and some 2,000 troops.

Nations Security Council resolution authorising intervention against the regime – which Russia would never have allowed. It was also an implicit desire to present itself, regionally, as a provider of stability especially when contrasted with the results of the US interventionism mentioned by Putin in his speech to the General Assembly. And it seems certain that, alongside its capacity for regional dialogue, this generalised perception may spread across North Africa – above all to Algeria, Libya and Egypt – given the degraded image of the United States and certain European allies.

### Iran, in search of lost centrality

Since the start of the war, Iran has offered support to the Assad regime, sharing intelligence information, providing military training, loans to the regime and, finally, boots on the ground. The most recent data claim there have been **2,100 casualties in Iranian fighters** from the war, which half of it corresponds to **Shia militias** of Afghan and Pakistani origin and those of other communities with the same creed fighting with the Revolutionary Guard. At a financial level, much of the Assad government's budget (essential for the sustainability of the system in the areas under the regime's control) comes from Iranian public coffers. Tehran has been an ally to the regime since the start of the war at many levels, moving from playing a deliberately limited role and mainly providing indirect support, to taking leadership in combat and directing the military strategy to be followed by the Syrian regime in certain areas, thereby providing crucial assistance to Assad.

The creation of the corridor to the Mediterranean – a long-awaited link from Iran to the Mediterranean through Iraq and Syria – remains greatly important to Tehran and to achieve it the consolidation of its current influence in Syria once the armed conflict has finished will be fundamental. The control of strategic sectors of the Syrian economy is one of the trump cards used to keep the Assad government within its sphere of influence. Iranian exports to Syria have **doubled in the past two years**, making Iran its leading trade partner. The two countries signed multiple **memorandums of understanding** in the first months of 2018, although the majority remain merely projects on paper and only a few have actually been carried out. The Syrian government, for its part, continues to indebt itself with Iran in order to maintain its state structure, its national budget for 2018 being just **\$6 billion**. In 2013, Tehran opened a **credit line** of \$3.5bn which was increased in 2015 by a further \$1 billion. Iranian companies participate in **projects related** to electricity and telecommunications and new projects are expected in the mining and oil sectors. The swift establishment of Iranian companies in Syria further strengthens the country's dependence on Tehran and consolidates its (asymmetric) ties with it. Despite maintaining fluid relations and coordination on the ground, Syria, for its part, is seeking to develop links with other actors to compensate for its dependence on Tehran.

Participation in the war also has consequences for Iran at the domestic level: the “deep state” and the Rouhani admin-

istration are seeking to promote a new international image that dispels the country's sense of isolation. Iran entered the Syrian war with the deployment of the elite Quds force, a cornerstone of the Revolutionary Guard. After more than seven years of war, some sources calculate Iran's spending at **between \$6 billion and \$35 billion** per year and estimate its casualties to run into the **hundreds, including those of prominent generals** such as Hossein Hamedani, who died in the outskirts of Aleppo in 2015 and who was given a state funeral.

Russia's intervention in the war has noticeably reduced Iran's role. Tehran no longer seems so decisive. Russia considers the Astana process not as an alternative but as a **additional component that should be integrated into the Geneva process**. That is why as well as the meetings and encounters with Iran and recently with Turkey, Russia has also kept the telephone lines open with Washington, the UN and Tel Aviv. This contact with Israel unnerves Tehran and confirms its suspicions that despite being allies and maintaining good relations, the two countries' interests diverge when it comes to the Syrian question. Iran considers the Geneva process to be an effort to push it away from the negotiation table and only through direct and prolonged intervention in Syria has it managed to legitimate itself as an element to be taken into account. Any attempt to pivot towards the Geneva process excludes Tehran and poses a risk and a direct challenge to its

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long-term plans as a regional power. Hence Rouhani's statements advocating the need for the Syrian people to decide on Syria's future.

Ankara and Tehran, on the other hand, share fears over the Kurdish issue but not for the same reasons. Turkey continues to place the focus on the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), but for Iran, which has a Kurdish population of over 6.5 million concentrated mainly in four provinces bordering Turkey, Iraq and Turkmenistan, the great red line is the **federalisation of Syria**.

Iran considers maintaining a dominant position on Syria to be fundamental and, while it leaves the door open to the entrance of other actors – especially when it comes to investments for the future reconstruction of the country – it continues to underline the necessity of its participation in any kind of negotiation.

### Turkey, different interests, identical ambitions

During the initial phases of the Syrian war, Ankara saw the conflict as an opportunity to act as an intermediary and thereby expand its political influence in the region. But Ankara's strategy in Syria clashed directly with Iran and Russia when Turkey began to provide training, materiel and logistical support to various Islamist opposition groups fighting on the ground against the Assad regime, mainly the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

Against this backdrop, the trilateral conversations contributed to changing the Turkish policy in Syria, which went from supporting, fundamentally, the Sunnis, who were losing power in Syria, to cooperating with Moscow and Tehran, the leader and main backer of the Shias. On the other hand, Assad's strategy towards the Kurds in Syria has consisted, from the start of the war, of avoiding confrontation with them. This strengthened the Kurdish groups significantly, allowing them to create a space for building strategic alliances. This gradually displaced Ankara's focus from the Assad regime, making the Syrian Kurds their main enemy and the priority in their foreign policy.

The Kurdish issue has therefore become a red line not to be crossed, as the president, the minister of foreign affairs and **other high-ranking officials** have repeatedly said on all possible platforms. The risk of a Kurdish entity emerging along its border has shifted Turkey's priorities from an anti-Assad policy, which turned out to be unsustainable as Assad contin-

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ued to gain territory, to an anti-Kurd policy.

That is why Turkey has firmly and systematically opposed the presence of Kurdish groups in the Syrian National Dialogue Congress launched by the Kremlin and postponed until January 2018 after Turkey's objection to the planned presence of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). In the field Turkey's main objective in Syria is now to avoid the establishment of an uninterrupted territory along its Syrian and Iraqi border under Kurdish control and dominated by the PYD and the YPG.

Following the first agreement between the three countries in September 2017 on de-escalation zones in Syria a safe zone was established in Idlib in northern Syria on the border with Turkey. Ankara backed this plan but launched Operation Olive Branch, a military operation in Afrin, in order to avoid the creation of a Kurdish corridor, taking total control of the city mid-way through March 2018.

For its part, Moscow has kept the lead in the new agenda on Syria through the start of conversations and the negotiation with all interested parties, prompting concern in both Ankara and Tehran. But US determination to cooperate with the YPG in Syria and the configuration of power after the attempted coup d'état in Turkey – strongly nationalist and sceptical towards the West – has pushed Turkey to move closer to the Kremlin.

Thus, on November 20th 2017, Turkey opened its airspace to Russia for the first time in four years, a date that coincided with Assad's visit to Sochi, which took on symbolic importance due to the clear message sent by Putin: Assad will be involved in the conversations over peace in Syria. And in the

subsequent trilateral summit on November 22nd 2017, the three leaders agreed to preserve the territorial integrity and political unity of Syria.

The cooperation between Russia, Iran and Turkey forms a framework that could be called the Sochi trio but which is a long way from being an alliance: the relationship between the participants is highly selective and there is no trust between them. Though Turkey has a lot at stake on the Kurdish issue, the subject is not so pressing for its Russian and Iranian interlocutors. And yet the Assad regime and Iran are also willing to turn back Kurdish advances due to the fact that they also have large Kurdish populations within their borders. Turkey cannot push through all of its Kurdish agenda without compromising Syria, especially since the joint statement by Putin and Trump on November 11th assuring that a military solution in Syria is unviable. What is more, Turkey's energy dependency on Russia<sup>2</sup> as well as its recent purchase of the S-400 air defence system<sup>3</sup> are signs of imbalanced power relations between the two countries: Turkey cannot act freely without Russia's blessing.

For Russia, having influence over the PYD and YPG means exercising influence over all the states that are worried about a Kurdish problem and, potentially, not losing the Kurds to the United States if Washington decides to have a presence in Syria. The asymmetric relationship between Turkey and Russia also explains why Ankara tolerates Moscow's backing for the Kurds while accusing the United States of supporting those same groups.

Despite this, the three parties need each other because of their respective areas of influence in Syria. This leaves the peace conversations in a delicate balance. The question is whether Ankara will manage to block Kurdish participation in the future conversations with Syria, and whether Russia is able and willing to involve the Kurds in the plans for Syria's reconstruction without upsetting Turkey.

### And now what? Still pending in the short term

The next meeting in Tehran of presidents Erdoğan, Putin and Rouhani will be a new test through which to evaluate the solidity of their alliance and the chances of them managing to articulate and impose a lasting agreement for Syria. The **joint statement published** by the three heads of state after the meeting in Ankara in April 2018 reiterated the importance of the summit and its continuation in the future, the commitment to the territorial integrity of Syria, and support for the Constitutional Committee agreed at the Syrian National Dialogue Congress held in Sochi at the end of January. Despite their great differences on certain elements of the Syrian con-

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2. The ceremony of laying the first stone of the Akkuyu nuclear reactor, a Russo-Turkish project, was also performed during Putin's visit to Turkey for the trilateral summit in January 2018.
  3. This system will probably not be deployed before 2020 and has serious financing and technology transfer problems.

flict, the Sochi trio seem to have found a middle ground on which their interests converge. The main challenge they face at present relates to the tensions and incidents between Iran and Israel, which could ruin Russia's regional positioning. And it is foreseeable that these tensions will worsen following the announcement of the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement with Iran, not to mention whether any kind of US and/or Israeli military intervention is taken against Tehran.

Assad's future will be another thorny issue to resolve. Erdoğan publicly welcomed the April 14th bombings by the United States, France and the United Kingdom, while Moscow – not without some overreaction – denounced them as a grave attack against the legitimate Syrian government. Nevertheless, on this point it must be borne in mind that only Tehran seems firmly convinced of the absolute necessity of keeping Assad in place, at least until elections are held in the country. For his part, Assad has made no apparent concession to the Kremlin's demands, despite its vital role backing his regime. Hence, the April bombings, ironically, were not necessarily bad for Moscow. Everything that puts moderate pressure on Assad can help the Kremlin in its diplomatic strategy. The same may be noted with regard to Russia's tacit backing for the Turkish military intervention. In this case, not only with a view to pressuring Assad, but also because of the potential rift Turkish intervention against Kurdish forces that have the backing of some 2,000 US troops on the ground could open up in NATO. These troops, by the way, may represent another of the main diplomatic stumbling blocks for the Sochi three. Everything will depend on whether the opinion of President Trump, who has expressed his desire to withdraw them, prevails over that of the Pentagon, which wants to keep them there. As a result, despite being in the last phases of the war, peace still seems a long way off for Syria.

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<b>Trilateral meetings</b>	<b>Astana process</b>	<b>Geneva process</b>	<b>European Union</b>
	<i>(not to be confused with the 2015 opposition conference in Astana)</i>	<p><b>July 2012</b> Geneva Conference I, on Kofi Annan's initiative. USA, Russia, Great Britain at a high level and with a Chinese representative.</p> <p><b>January 2014</b> Geneva Conference II Participation of the UN, the European Union, the Arab League, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Syria and the opposition, along with all the MENA countries, except Tunisia, Libya, Yemen and Iran.</p>	
	<b>December 2016</b> Putin and Erdoğan agree to hold Syrian peace talks in Astana, Kazakhstan.	<b>February 2016</b> Geneva Conference III Participation of the opposition (including Kurds), the Syrian government and the UN.	
<b>November 2017</b> , Sochi. The three presidents and Assad separately with Putin.	<p><b>January 2017</b> Participation of the Syrian opposition (12 factions), Syrian government in the presence of Russia, Iran and Turkey.</p> <p><b>February 2017</b> Same participants. Adoption of a document to formalise the supervision of the December ceasefire. The continuation is agreed of a mechanism of exchange of bodies and prisoners, including women and children.</p> <p><b>March 2017</b> The opposition groups withdraw</p> <p><b>May 2017</b> Russia, Turkey and Iran agree a plan for de-escalation zones in areas controlled by the rebels. The plan requests the cessation of hostilities between the government and the rebel groups in four safe areas to bring aid to civilians. The opposition suspends its participation, alleging that the Syrian government is continuing to bomb rebel areas.</p> <p><b>July 2017</b> Russia, Turkey and Iran fail to define the monitoring of the four previously agreed safe zones.</p> <p><b>September 2017</b> Russia, Turkey and Iran agree to establish de-escalation zones in Syria for six months, which may be extended in the future. The zones include, in part or in whole, western Ghouta and the provinces of Idlib, Homs, Latakia, Aleppo and Hama</p> <p><b>October 2017</b> Previous agreements are maintained, and the exchange of detainees, prisoners of war and missing persons is addressed. Russia, Turkey and Iran want to find a political solution under UN Security Council Resolution 2254.</p> <p><b>December 2017</b> Delegations from the interested parties participate: Russia, Iran and Turkey, along with representatives of the Syrian regime and an opposition delegation.</p>		<b>April 2017</b> The EU hosts the conference "Supporting the future of Syria and the region" in Brussels, which is co-chaired by the UN, Germany, Kuwait, Norway, Qatar and the United Kingdom. Russia and Iran are present as participants.
<b>January 2018</b> , Sochi. On the initiative of Russia, the Syrian National Dialogue Congress is held in Sochi. 1,500 delegates participate.			<b>April 2018</b> "Supporting the future of Syria and the region" II Turkey joins as a participant.
<b>April 2018</b> , Ankara			