

Russia's Priorities in Syria

What is the issue?

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- As the civil war winds down, the once overlapping interests of Moscow and Tehran are disentangling.

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- Russia now faces a big dilemma in West Asia on defending its allies.

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How did the Syrian Conflict pan out?

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- President Vladimir Putin decided to send Russian troops to Syria in September 2015, at a time when the Assad regime in Syria was on the brink of collapse.

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- The Islamic State (IS) had then already declared Raqqa in eastern Syria as its de facto capital and had a formidable ground force.

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- Other rebels (US allies) had captured Damascus suburbs, and parts of Aleppo, Ghouta, Idlib province and southern towns like Daraa and Quneitra.

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- Several rebel factions were breathing down on Damascus and the Mediterranean coastal belt, the last stronghold of the regime.

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- But presently, after 3 years of war, the Mr. Assad is safe and his regime has recaptured most of the territories it lost in the early days of the war.

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- This turnaround owes it greatly to the coordinated efforts of Russia, Iran and the Assad regime and various Iranian proxies.

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- Supported by Russian air power, Iran backed Hezbollah fought alongside the Syrian Army on the ground against rebels and jihadists.

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What were the differences in intentions?

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- While they were partnering in the war against common enemies, the Russians and Iranians had different goals in Syria.
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- **Russian Aim** - For Mr. Putin, the Syrian intervention was a big gamble, through which he sought to bolster Russian stakes in the middle-east.
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- While the Obama regime was indecisive on which side to take in the conflict, Mr. Putin put his weight solidly behind the Assad regime.
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- As the regime is currently safe, Russia wants to exit soon and doesn't want to get caught up like the US in Afghanistan.
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- Therefore, Moscow is continuously pressing the Assad regime to be ready for a lasting political solution to the crisis by incorporating significant changes.
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- **Iranian Aim** - Contrarily, Iran does not want any radical change in Syrian regime as such a move will weaken its standing in Syrian polity.
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- Syria's political position is critical for Iran to exercise a strong regional influence stretching across - Bagdad, Damascus and Lebanon.
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- Notably, Lebanon lies on the Mediterranean coast and both Syria and Lebanon share borders with Israel and have active Shia Militia networks.
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- Hezbollah has already built a strong base along the Lebanon-Israel border, and Iran plans to strengthen such build-ups to strategically pressurise Israel.
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What are the emerging cracks?

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- While the war calculus forced Russians and Iranians to downplay their differences, the winding up of conflict has led to cracks in the alliance.
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- Russia is now feeling less reliant on Iran, and Tehran is growing wary of Moscow's game plans, which is clearly laid down priorities.
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- Notably, Russia has even resisted provocations from Turkey, US and Israel in order to stay focussed to its mission in Syria by avoiding risky escalations.
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- Russia completely controls Syria's airspace and has worked out de-confliction mechanisms with the U.S. and Israel to avoid direct attacks on each-other.
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- Significantly, while the U.S. has mostly carried out strikes against the IS, Israel has used Syrian air space only to attack Iran and Hezbollah (Russian allies).
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- Mr. Putin's lukewarm interest in defending his allies and his lack of concern for increasing role of Turkey in Syria has put Iran in a fix.
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- Russia's call for all foreign troops to exit Syria immediately after the war was

also dismissed by Iran, which has now stated that it would retain troops.

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What are Iran's concerns?

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- Iran doesn't have many allies and Trump had also scrapped the Iranian Nuclear Deal, which has made Iran's diplomacy tougher.

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- Return of possible economic sanctions is another issues that it presently making Iranian polity nervous.

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- At this juncture, it won't be possible for Iran to antagonise Russia, as containing Saudi, Israel and the US in the region is no easy task.

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- This unique situation has put Mr. Putin in a commanding position in the region, and he seems to have got enough room for muscle flexing.

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- While Russia is trying to balance Turkish, Israeli and Iranian interests in the region, the geo-political complexity might make the game tough.

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- Notably, Turkey is part of NATO and Israel is the strongest ally of US in the region, with naturally pits them against Russia (cold war hangover).

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Source: The Hindu

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