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THE NEW POWER COUPLE: RUSSIA AND IRAN IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Ellie Geranmayeh & Kadri Liik

SUMMARY

- Iran-Russia relations have reached an unprecedented peak, fueled by military cooperation in Syria, a shared vision of the global order, and mutual criticism of Western policy in the Middle East.
- Tehran is a useful ally to Moscow in a highly unstable region, but it is just one thread in Moscow's patchwork of important relationships that need careful balancing.
- Moscow offers Tehran a critical means of protecting its regional security interests. However, Iran's leadership is divided on how best to hedge bets between Eastern and Western powers to achieve the country's strategic objectives.
- Despite their differences, the war in Syria looks set to be the crucible of Moscow-Tehran cooperation for some time to come, given its centrality to the strategic ambitions of both parties.
- Instead of pursuing policies that attempt to exploit divisions between Iran and Russia, Europe should use its limited leverage to reduce violence in Syria and, if possible, pave road for political transition later down the road. This can only happen with better understanding of the drivers of Iran and Russia's policy in the region.

Over the past year, Russia and Iran have entered a new phase of military cooperation unprecedented in their relations since the end of World War II. As a result of Russian intervention in Syria, their armed forces are planning operations and fighting together in support of Bashar al-Assad's government. In August, Russia began sending a wave of strategic bombers into Syria from an Iranian airbase. As intended, this caught the world's attention. It sent a bold signal to the West that both were committed to safeguarding their interests in Syria despite the costs, and was a rare instance of the Islamic Republic authorising action by a foreign power on its soil. This latest cooperation represents a substantial deepening of the political and defence ties between the two countries ushered in by Vladimir Putin on his return to the Russian presidency, and of links marked by an expanding arms trade over the past three decades.

The new closeness between Moscow and Tehran in Syria has already had serious consequences for Europe. It has strengthened Assad's hand, increased violence, resulted in more refugees flowing into European countries, and further marginalised Europe on the diplomatic track. Yet question marks remain about the durability of the relationship. Does it signify a sustainable strategic alliance that will reshape the geopolitics of the wider Middle East? Or are we merely experiencing a high point in the seesaw saga of Russian-Iranian relations – a saga where cooperation will always be limited and tarnished by mutual distrust?

Europe needs to understand the nature of this new Russian-Iranian dynamic in Syria because it will affect its policies and freedom of action in multiple fields: obviously in the