
THE IMPACT OF THE IRAN-RUSSIA ALLIANCE

- 25.08.2016

Haaretz, 24 August 2016

In the past year we have witnessed an unusual rapprochement between Iran and Russia. Although the two countries have a long history of ties, they have upgraded relations since the signing of the nuclear deal between Iran and the world powers. Moscow and Tehran have signed a series of agreements, from the building of a new nuclear reactor, continuation of the construction of the reactor in Bushehr, and the supply of S-300 surface-to-air missiles – something Russia refrained from doing for years, due in part to Israeli and American pressure. Now there are also discussions about Russia supplying Iran with advanced fighter planes.

Of late there has also been military and intelligence cooperation, designed to protect the rule of Syrian President Bashar Assad. This culminated in Russian fighter planes using Iran's Shahid Nojeh air base in order to attack Syria. This was the first time that Russia used a base outside its territory to attack a third country – and the first time that Iran has permitted a foreign country to use its air bases.

Although the agreement has been temporarily suspended due to domestic criticism in Iran, an announcement noted that the accord will be renewed as necessary.

These developments strengthen Iran's status as a central player in the Middle Eastern arena and give it an important role in any future arrangement in Syria and Iraq. The two implications of these developments – the strengthening of Iran and Hezbollah and the undermining of the Saudi-led axis of Sunni countries, which is trying to check Iranian influence – are not in Israel's interests.

On the face of it there seemed to be a significant improvement in Israel's relations with Russia in recent years. However, does that mean that there is an identity of interests on the issues central to Israel's national security? After all, it turns out that Russia's interest is to boost the future influence of Israel's enemies: Iran and Hezbollah, in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.

These developments are taking place under circumstances that are very convenient for Russia and its regional allies. The United States is not interested in increasing its involvement in the region and is willing to accept Assad's remaining in power and increased Russian involvement in the region – as long as this contributes to the defeat of Islamic State. Turkey, which is afraid of the effect of Syria's disintegration on the status of the Kurds, is also willing to accept Assad and the strengthening of Iran and Russia. Saudi Arabia is concerned about the growing power of the Shi'ite axis. But beyond continuing to supply arms and money to opposition groups in Syria, it is unable to bring about a change in the overall situation.

Israel cannot influence the direction of the developments. A continued dialogue with Russia is important, and should be nurtured despite the conflict of interests. Cooperation with the Sunni Arab countries is likely to turn out to be less attractive if the Sunni axis is weakened in relation to the Shi'ite axis. The renewed relations with Ankara will also be limited by the apparent change in direction of Turkish policy.

In light of all these developments it is essential that Israel strengthen the dialogue with the next U.S. administration as much as possible, in order to safeguard its regional interests.

Kaynak/Source: