

## **Russian-Turkey Syrian deal will hold, as the Israel-Iran conflict comes into focus**

Omar Kassem

Here is the story that will dominate 2017. Many commentators tell us that the Russo-Turkish Syrian peace deal in Syria, based on past experience, will fail. They also say that the defining conflict in the Middle-East is between Sunni and Shi'a (Saudi Arabia vs Iran). Such views are mistaken.

Those who believe that the Russo-Turkish peace deal is doomed base their arguments on Iranian expansionism with the Shi'a militias as its vanguard, and the duplicity of the Assad régime. And yet the success of the Russo-Turkish deal and the 'Astana' process that will follow in Kazakhstan, aside from their apparent need to quickly tie up loose ends in Ghouta and other locations in the south of Syria, and aside from the problem of remaining pockets of DAESH/ISIL, is actually in Iran's **vital interest**.

As Hassan Nasralla said [recently](#) this represents a decisive victory for Iranian interests; not something therefore that Iran should be unhappy about. Nasralla's *Lebanese Hezbollah* together with all the other smaller Shi'a militias in Syria, represent a cohesive force under the tight control of Qasim Suleimani and the Quds force. The Quds force hasn't shed the blood of some its best leaders in Syria over the past five years, along with [an estimated \\$175bn in costs](#), to allow the Assad régime, which now depends on it absolutely, to have its own agenda.

Assad and his régime has been a pawn in covert wars and proxy conflicts between the US and Iran, ever since the G W Bush administration started using the Egyptian and Saudi embassies in Damascus to foment Sunni unrest [against Assad in 2006](#). By 2009, the liberal internationalists amongst the US Democrats who brought us Obama were, [according to their policy documents](#), at one with neoconservatives over the desire to continue an imperialist strategy in the Middle East at the centre of which would be the planned demise of Assad. They would try and establish Israel's hegemony, however, without 'boots on the ground' this time; Iraq had been too devastating a defeat. Their tool of choice in the ensuing Syrian proxy wars were jihadi militants, including DAESH/ISIL, which we know was especially nurtured for this purpose, according to now notorious [US Department of Defense documents](#). The objective was to cut the lines of supply and communication between the *Lebanese Hezbollah* in Southern Lebanon and Iran, which strategic alliance was a threat to Israel.

But having lost the Iraq War, and now also lost the Syrian proxy war, the US faces an endgame in the region. As the main beneficiary of this debacle, the Iranian leadership is clearly jubilant, and we see the IRGC chief [declaring this week](#) that Aleppo is now

effectively Iran's first line of defence. So why ever would Iran and its militias want to upset the Astana apple cart? If the Assad régime, firmly in the grip of Iran, is breaking the ceasefire in a number of localities across south and central Syria, this is part of Iran set out its stall for the Astana meetings.

What emerges from the rubble of 2016, however, is an Israel-Iran conflict in much greater focus. It is the defining conflict in the Middle-East region and if Western media are promoting the idea of a Sunni-Shi'a conflict as the current dominant narrative, it is to deflect attention from this fact, and from the fact also of the sheer and utter failure of US and European policy in the region.

Saudi Arabia is not a credible opponent for Iran, for a thesis of this kind to be sustained. It is a weak family-run petro-state with no national structures other than a highly repressive internal security system which targets its own people. It possesses a surfeit of US-made weapons that have little or relevance to the all-encompassing and asymmetrical war Iran has been waging. Nothing expresses the collapse of Saudi Arabia's role in the region better than Rafik Hariri turning his back on the kingdom in order [to back the Lebanese Hezbollah's](#) nominee for the presidency of Israel's northern neighbour. Lebanon is Israel's only neighbour not to be firmly under the Zionist yoke.

In sum, there is no Sunni-Shi'a conflict as such because there is actually no 'entity' active in respect of what might be claimed to be 'Sunni' interests which is opposing Iran. Apart from Saudi Arabia, the Sunni Arab world boasts an Egyptian state collapsing under the misrule of an unprecedentedly vicious tyranny, which has abrogated its regional responsibilities, and which constantly blackmails Saudi Arabia with the prospect of extending Iranian influence to North Africa. Turkey on the other hand is a co-host at Astana, actively negotiating with Iran.

A thus dominant Iran in the Middle East will not shoot the Russo-Turkish deal down. It will use it to consolidate its spectacular series of victories.

But Russian policy-makers are keenly aware that they are currently being associated with a Shi'a project. They have to face public opinion in the Sunni Arab street and among the Sunni, mainly Tatar, populations in its own country (14% of the population), as well as in its, again mostly Sunni, neighbours in Central Asia. [Russian commentators](#) are keen to reverse this impression. It is instructive that the first action Russia took in Aleppo was to [deploy Chechen \(Sunni\) military](#) police.

The Russo-Turkish deal is thus of vital importance and of strategic interest to Russia, whereas its relationship with Iran is of a more tactical nature, encompassing a complex of sometimes mutual, sometimes conflicting, interests.

Iran, on the other hand, needs Russian cover to sustain its new dominant position across the Middle East. Iran is highly dependent on Russia, for two reasons. Firstly, Iran's situation with regard to the P5+1 nuclear deal with the US ([JCPOA](#)) is decidedly tricky. JCPOA is opposed by many in the US Congress, which despite ratifying it, nevertheless continues to ratchet sanctions rhetoric up rather than down. The incoming Trump administration, with a National Security Adviser (Michael Flynn) who hates Iran, is highly sceptical of the nuclear deal. Since Russia is a [crucial guarantor of JCPOA](#), it is clearly inconceivable that Iran should do anything substantive to undermine Russian prestige. It would do so at its peril.

The second aspect to Iran's dependence on Russia is military. Iranian compliance at Astana is guaranteed *grosso modo* (in other words, one should expect difficult negotiations), because Russia can provide Iran with cover against Western aerial threats, from its S-400 and S-300 installations at the Khmeimim airbase, if it chooses. The Khmeimim airbase and the [fast expanding Tartus naval base](#) near Latakia, together with its naval fire-power based in the Caspian, has established Russia as the dominant power in the northern Middle East.

If Iran's ideological revolutionary project is to continue unchecked then it would destabilise Central Asia, the Caucasus and ultimately the Muslim heartlands in Russia. Thus the Astana process, taking place squarely in the middle of Central Asia, in the capital of Kazakhstan, is primarily about Russia and Turkey exploring their relationship with Iran, establishing the boundaries of the new Middle East order.

While the Assad régime has been allowed by Iran to push its luck over the past week, the [ceasefire nevertheless holds](#). Despite announcements about maintaining the Syria's integrity, Iran seeks control over Damascus and southern Syria, where it has been effectively pursuing a policy of [demographic change](#) in the interests of consolidating its land link with *Lebanese Hezbollah*. It is clearly seeking to trade this in exchange for its co-operation in other areas. For instance, we see the sudden about face of Iraqi president Haidar al-Abadi who, after months of anti-Turkish rhetoric about Turkish forces in Northern Iraq, is now [co-operating fully with Turkey](#). Abadi's declaration [rejecting the presence](#) of the Kurdish PKK in Iraq, signals a spectacular about turn in Iran for its long-standing support of the PKK operations in the Qandil mountains.

Little is said about Iran's role in the past in fomenting division between Kurds and Turks, upsetting prospects for a solution of the 'Kurdish problem' within the Turkish democratic space, in order to avoid having itself to face calls for either autonomy or representation by Iranian Kurds. But the consolidation of the relationship between Barzani's Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and Turkey over recent years, now leads Iran to seek guarantees that Barzani ceases his support for the opposition group

called the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI). Iranian/Assadi action in Syria, therefore, cannot be viewed in isolation.

Russia will seek to use its relationship with Turkey to contain Iranian expansionism in Central Asia. Russia's prestige is clearly at stake as it takes its deal with Turkey to the [UNSC as a Russian-sponsored project](#). The UNSC motion was passed unanimously calling for the "rapid, safe and unhindered" delivery of humanitarian aid throughout Syria, and anticipating the meetings between the Syrian government and opposition representatives Astana in late January.

The now UN-endorsed Middle-East peace process **excludes the West as a central partner**. This is historic and Russia will not broke any opposition to this process from Iran. As Iran finds its feet in regard to the new Russo-Turkish alliance, we see a Russo-Turkish-Iranian security architecture being formed covering the northern Middle-East and Central Asia. This is a remarkable development by any stretch of the imagination, despite the fact that it is fraught with problems.

Furthermore, if the Trump administration is unhappy with JCPOA and will seek to contain Iran, it will have to back the Russo-Turkish alliance. As Israel ponders Iran's success at building a Shi'a bridge from Tehran to Southern Lebanon, as well as its vital [economic interests with Turkey](#), it may actually tone down the rhetoric emanating from Trump and his Ambassadorial appointment to Tel Aviv (David Friedman), possibly to their surprise. If the Palestinian population does not face the full horrors expected from a Trump administration, it will be because ultimately, even if the two-state solution is comatose, because in order to secure the future of the Jewish population of Israel, requires taking account of the Iranian project making the Palestinian [cause its own](#). If Israel isn't careful, the same unintended consequences which handed Iraq and Syria to Iran on a plate, will act to give it Palestine in the same fashion.

The Sunni-Shi'a conflict promoted by Western media as its main narrative for the Middle-East is paper thin, given that it has been politically, rather than culturally, motivated. It will turn in the course of the Astana process. The decline of Saudi Arabia sees its withdrawal from Syria, which was not mentioned once in King Salman's 'state of the Kingdom speech' on [December 23 2016](#). A much reduced *Jabhat al-Nusra/Jabhat Fath el-Sham* have retired to Idlib, where they are being marginalised. Aleppo fell because of the defection of a large part of the rebel force to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), now operating in the context of the Turkish 'Operation Euphrates Shield'. What is significant is that despite ongoing Iranian/Assadi troublemaking in Syria ahead of Astana, there are no signs of a plan to attack Idlib. It continues as a rebel fortress. This is especially interesting given that it is in the immediate vicinity of the Russian military complex in Syria, and that Russia has [long been negotiating with the rebels](#).

As Saudi power in the region declines, along with US power, Qatar, a major funder of *Jabhat al-Nusra* in the past, now fully engages with the [Russo-Turkish world vision](#). This new departure also involves Qatar investing in the one Russian oil and gas company whose management is particularly close to Putin. [In completing an investment in Rosneft](#) along with its Anglo-Swiss commodities trading subsidiary, Glencore, in a deal worth more than \$11bn, Qatar, which hosts a [Turkish military base](#) on its peninsula, is thus putting its money behind the Russo-Turkish project.

The US and the West losing the initiative in the Middle-East to regional players will be reinforced by the conflict between the incoming Trump administration and the American 'deep state' over how to deal with the one country that now holds the balance of power in the Middle-East. A conflicted policy towards Russia will render the West mute. Now it should begin to ponder how one of NATO's largest militaries, on which it [relies in Afghanistan](#), is effectively an ally of the alliance's prime antagonist.