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## The development of Russian-Iranian relations in the context of the Syrian Civil War

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## **Abstract**

Russian-Iranian relations have been complicated since the very first interactions the nations made with each other. The up and down nature of the ties continued up until the first protest of the Arab Spring and the breakout of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. During these events, both countries with known revisionist ambitions and anti-US sentiment gained new spaces of convergence upon which a different dynamic was brought into their relationship. Since 2011, Russia and Iran bolstered their ties and cooperation in numerous areas and on the surface, it might seem like a strong partnership has been formed. Only when analysing the situation in-depth, a continuation of troubled relations appears. This thesis uncovers in detail all there is to know about Russian-Iranian relations and their development since the start of the Syrian conflict. The work focuses on both areas thanks to which the ties flourished as well as limitations the relationship has had. Furthermore, using a well-known theoretical framework, the thesis follows the question whether the countries managed to create an alliance between each other.

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## Introduction

The Syrian Civil War and the Arab Spring have sent a shockwave through the Middle East. Beside creating gruesome civil war and ensuing humanitarian crisis, these events changed the political landscape dramatically. On a first glance, this could have been perceived as shifts affecting relations only within the Middle East. However, these events have reached far outside of the region, affecting the development of ties with various powers in the world as this thesis will uncover (Issa, 2016; BBC, 2016).

During the Syrian conflict, one of the shifts could have been witnessed on the Russian-Iranian ties and their rapprochement (Eastoe et al., 2017, p. 3). Since the conflict started, the world saw an unprecedented cooperation between the two countries with a sole goal in mind - to keep Bashar al-Assad's regime in power. Moscow's and Tehran's joint military and diplomatic ventures in Syria were what grab the headlines of many media outlets throughout the world and seemingly created a common space between the two countries (Odeyemi, 2016, p. 122 – 137; Bastani, 2015; Milani, 2016). As such, questions arise – has the Syrian conflict been the only fuel to Russia's deepening ties with Tehran? Can there be factors under the surface and outside of media spotlight that have been overlooked?

The main aim of this thesis is to present in-depth the development of Russian-Iranian relations since the breakout of the Syrian civil war until the 2017 US presidential elections while providing a detailed analysis of the nature these relations hold. Although research has been done on the topic, none of it, in my opinion, uncovered and presented a complete picture of the Russian-Iranian ties. This thesis is designed to fill this gap.

Part of the research will be devoted to the shared objectives and goals that contributed to the rapprochement. The goal is also to determine whether the two countries managed to form an alliance and introduce factors that paved a way to this partnership. On this note, the work will introduce a theoretical framework which will help determine what common ground contributed into the alliance creation. The thesis will also uncover the negative factors that have burdened the relationship thus far and to get the full picture, the thesis will also present

the past dealings of both countries and their shared history as well as how these factors translate into the modern-day ties.

Given the complexity of the issue, the thesis aims to answer several key research questions. The leading overarching question is following: How have the Russian-Iranian relations change since the breakout of the Syrian Civil War? This question and its answer will form a backbone of this work's structure.

To fully explain all factors relating to this question, several sub-questions must be devised.

These sub-questions are following:

- What form of ties has Russia and Iran brought from their historical dealings?
- What areas of common ground have helped Moscow and Tehran form their ties?
- What limitations have these ties had and what have been the impacts of these factors?
- Has Russian and Iran formed an alliance since the breakout of the Syrian civil war?

### **Structure of the thesis**

This work will be structured into four main chapters. Following the introduction, a first chapter will be dedicated to the theoretical foundations. Specifically, this part will present the alliance formation theory by Stephen Walt from his critically-acclaimed book *Origins of Alliances*. His work has been enormously influential in the alliance formation debate, according to some one of the most important works on this topic. Contemporary research of alliances cannot be done without at least mentioning Walt's thoughts (Stuenkel, 2013; Macdonald, 1989, p. 796 – 798). As such, Walt's work cannot miss from my thesis and will form a crucial ground to base arguments on.

The second chapter will be present a literature review, introducing the main findings and information that so far has been researched on the topic. The literature review will include already conducted researches featuring different perspectives on the nature of relations between Russian and Iran and the forces driving these two countries together or apart. It will also focus on the crucial topic of alliance formation between Moscow and Tehran. The

literature review will draw the information from various opinion streams, focusing on international, Russian and Iranian scholars and statesmen.

The third chapter will focus on the historical dimension of the Russian-Iranian relations, uncovering the past dealings of the two countries. Its importance lies in the fact that historical connections translate into their present-day decision making and have appeared to be essential to the Russian-Iranian dynamic. The historical overview will already focus on the alliances that might have been formed in this timeframe with regards to the theoretical framework.

The fourth chapter will form a pillar of the research. It will be focused on investigating the gradual development of ties between the two countries. This chapter will be largely devoted the topic of a common ground on which both countries can build their relations or possibly alliance on as well as the factors limiting development of these ties. The chapter itself will be dissected into three subchapters, first focusing on the areas of convergence, second will analyse how have the shared goals materialized in within the Russia-Iranian relationship and how this aided the process of deepening the ties. The second subchapter will also focus on what cooperation could be considered as a sign of an alliance. The third and the last subchapter will be devoted to the obstacles or limitation of the ties and the ways these obstacles have burdened the relationship.

The thesis will end with a conclusion, which will highlight all the main findings of its research. It will focus on the already mentioned research questions and answers to them that came up throughout the work.

### **Research design**

The aim of this thesis is to answer the overarching research question – How have the Russian-Iranian relations change since the breakout of the Syrian Civil War? Aforementioned sub-questions will be answered in chapters focusing on the related matter. As said, all questions raised will be brought back and answered in the conclusion of this thesis.

The research will use predominantly qualitative data, gathered through a literature analysis. Mainly secondary literature devoted to the topics discussed will be used for the research. Many political researchers and scholars such as Dmitri Trenin, Mark Katz, Abbas Milani, Nikolay Kozhanov and many others devoted their work and research to the topics surrounding the Russian-Iranian relations, their development, history together with opportunities and limitations they have. Work of these scholars will be introduced throughout the thesis. Primary sources will be used as well, although in a more limited manner for reasons described below. Specifically, the thesis will take into account direct statements of the Russian and Iranian governments and their representatives as well as key documents focused on the issues tackled by this research.

The timeframe for the research of thesis has been out due to the significant turning points in the international politics. The start of the Syrian Civil War in March 2011 brought the attention of essentially all major actors within the international system, including Russia and Iran. The significance of this event is not necessary to further explain. The end of the timeframe will be marked by the inauguration of the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States - Donald Trump. Trump's election and subsequent inauguration created a radically different situation within the context of Syrian Civil War and everyone involved. The current US administration has been able to change its policies dramatically and further development is impossible to predict. Furthermore, as will be highlighted within the research, US position in the Middle East and ties with Moscow and Tehran significantly affect the dynamic of Russian-Iranian relations. Thus, I argue it is appropriate to set these two marks as a start and end of a timeframe for this research.

There are difficulties that this research will be faced with. Most notably, the objectivity of sources is in question. As the research will use primary literature to some extent from the individual governments, this information must be critically assessed. In this very sense, the research aims to provide a diverse palette of opinions, some of these findings might be biased or hiding certain agenda.



## 1. Theoretical framework

This chapter will present a definition of an alliance that will be further studied and explore the theoretical basis upon which the relations between Moscow and Tehran will be examined in the following chapters. Theoretical approaches that will be introduced below will provide a necessary assistance with determining the prospects and possibilities of an alliance formation between the Russia and Iran. It will draw from work of Stephen Walt and his book *Origins of Alliances* that was published in 1987. Each of the specific prospects for alliance formation will receive its own subchapter below.

Firstly, Walt (1987, p. 1 & 12 - 13) defines alliance as „a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states. This relationship assumes some level of commitment and an exchange”.

The author presents throughout his work general possibilities, circumstances or causes under which two or more states may form an alliance between each other. Specifically, Walt opens this discussion by asking following questions: "What causes states to support one another's foreign policy or territorial integrity? How do statesmen choose [whom to form an alliance with] among potential threats when seeking external support? How do the great powers choose which states to protect, and how do weaker states decide whose protection to accept? In short, how do states choose their friends?" (Walt, 1989, p. 1).

Walt presents several central issues or divisive topics that have been a part of the discussion concerning alliance formation. First of these issues concerns the possible alignment of states once they feel threatened by another actor within the international arena. The crucial overarching question is whether states tend to ally with those who threaten them to mitigate the threat or whether they face the aggressive entities by collaborating with other states sharing the same views (ibis, p. 2 – 4). The second topic concerns the commonality of states' internal characteristics such as ideology and the influence this carries to alliance formation (ibis, p. 4). Third and last issue of the debate takes into account policy instruments such as

foreign aid or material help (arms shipments, provision of advisors or propaganda directed from one state to another) and its effect on alliance creation (ibis, p. 4 – 5).

Based on these issues and divisive topics, Walt presents five situations and prospects that may pave the way towards formal or informal alliance: Balancing, Bandwagoning, Ideology, Foreign aid and Transnational Penetration (ibis, p. 17).

### **1.1. Balancing and Bandwagoning**

First two general explanations behind alliance formation focus on external threats and states' desire to mitigate these dangers by creating an alliance. Balancing and bandwagoning are alliance formation processes existing as a response to a threat. According to Walt, "[b]alancing is defined as allying with other against the prevailing threat" (ibis, p. 17). States may decide to balance powers because of two reasons. Firstly, without balancing these states are putting themselves at risk of not creating a strong enough opposition to a threatening hegemon. Unlike with bandwagoning, Walt argues that states do not have to rely on a dominant power and by allying with their respective power peers, these states can assert their power into the possible alliances. Furthermore, members of given alliance are not able to dominate their allies, making the distribution of power equal. Secondly, Walt argues that weak actors who form an alliance together gain overall presence and influence in the international arena. When juxtaposed to the bandwagoning approach, weaker states are not able to make decisions (ibis, p. 17 - 19).

Bandwagoning brings the other approach. This term adverts to "alignment with the source of danger" (ibis, p. 17). With bandwagoning, security is much more precious. The threatening state is able to attract allies on its side, further enlarging its power footprint, while diminishing capabilities of its rivals (ibis, p. 17). Ultimately, the hypothesis is rather simple and counts on the fear effect created by one's military (or other) might and the attraction of power. In turn, these factors are supposed to draw potential adversaries to the source of power/threat. Walt argues if actors are likely to bandwagon, then alliances are not built on solid foundations.

Lastly, Walt argues that actors who exercise their offensive capabilities create situations prone to create a balancing process against themselves (ibis, p. 23 – 25).

## **1.2. Ideology**

Another topic of the alliance formation debate focuses on shared values or as Hans Morgenthau puts it – ideological solidarity. Within the debate, the term “ideologically based alliances” have more overarching meaning than one might assume. The term encompasses political, cultural, historical<sup>1</sup> or other characteristics state might share and build their alliances on. The hypothesis here is simple - actors that share above-mentioned attributes are more likely to form an alliance with each other. In the contrast of the already described process of balancing and bandwagoning, alliances that have been built on ideological traits do not necessarily have to emerge at times when countries face threats or feel endangered. According to Walt, these alliances may be understood as “... a way of defending one’s own political principles”. Furthermore, in the uncertain environment international arena provide, states sharing some of the already mentioned traits are less prone to be afraid of one another (ibis, p. 33 - 35).

## **1.3. Foreign aid**

The fourth prospect of alliance formation concerns the allocation of economic, military or other forms of help, otherwise known as foreign aid. According to Walt, foreign aid brings about a sense of gratitude and in realpolitik terms creates a dependency of one state on another, potentially forming a leverage on the receiving end. The hypothesis of alliance formation in this instance is not complicated to understand as Walt views it: “the more aid, the tighter the resulting alliance” (ibis, p. 41). Although the provision of foreign aid is a powerful tool of donor countries and their alliance creation toolkits, Walt argues its potential effect should not be over exaggerated. Rather, we should view the provision of foreign aid as a result of an already created alliance because of existing threat<sup>2</sup>. In such case, foreign aid is

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Walt in his article titled *Why Alliances endure or Collapse* points at the crucial importance of perceived historical connections between countries to the alliance building theme. If countries share a positive common history possibly combined with traits of similar culture, alliances are easier to build (Walt, 1997, p. 161).

<sup>2</sup> We ought to understand the provision of foreign aid as continuation of the balancing process (ibis, p. 42 & 46).

supposed to provide tools of weaker nations to counter a common threat of both the donor and the recipient. That is however not to say foreign aid cannot influence alliance creation, it simply may be more complex. Walt argues that the more desirable and unique asset the donor provides, the greater effect its provision will create as a tool for alliance formation (ibis, p. 41 – 43).

#### **1.4. Transnational penetration**

The last divisive topic Walt focuses on concerns the efforts of states to influence domestic political decision-making on various levels. Walt uses the term Transnational penetration and divides this influence/manipulation into three possible categories. The author points at “public officials whose loyalties are divided [and these officials] may use their influence to move their country closer to another” or “lobbyists may use a variety of means to alter public perceptions and policy decisions regarding a potential ally” and lastly “foreign propaganda may be used to sway elites and mass attitudes”. This hypothesis suggests that alliances can be created by exploiting one of the mentioned topics. Walt believes that generally democracies are easier targets to these efforts as they are more accessible to various measures highlighted above (ibis, 46 – 49).

## 2. Literature review

Several authors have focused on the development of Russian-Iranian relations over the last several years and as well as the shared history between the two nations, many then putting their interactions with each other into the context of the ongoing conflict in Syria and the changes that were brought by the Arab Spring. This chapter aims to present different perspectives on the Iranian-Russia relations, their origins and driving forces behind their development as well as any attempts at creating an alliance between each other.

A consensus among scholars and other observers of the Russian – Iranian relations can be scarce at times. With that being said, there is a conformity to an extent. Ties between Moscow and Tehran have dramatically improved over the research timeframe of this thesis. What already differs are the exact periods this relationship gained a new dynamic. Generally, two years are thrown around – 2012 and 2014.

According to some, the year 2012 was the year when Russian-Iranian relations turned a new page and began to improve, and Russian scholar Nikolay Kozhanov has been one of the protagonists of this claim. His articles provide us with an analytical overview of what has happened to the relations between Russia and Iran since the beginning of Arab Spring and the start of the Syrian Civil War. Importantly, Kozhanov views Putin's re-election in 2012 as a crucial moment in the Iranian – Russian relations, that as time progressed, strongly contrasted "substantial cooling of the bilateral dialogue" the ties experienced before (Kozhanov, 2015, p. 3; Kozhanov & Katz, 2016, p. 2 - 3).

Some scholars believe that the annexation of Crimean and the Ukrainian crisis with and following implementation of the sanction regime from the Western world against Russia was the moment the relations started to dramatically improve. Nikolay Kozhanov, while pointing at 2012 as the year the rapprochement started acknowledges together with Piotr Dutkiewicz the March 2014 to be a powerful catalyst for an even more drastic shift in Russian foreign policy towards Iran. According to the authors, several factors drove the countries together

from Russia's dismissing influence in "near abroad"<sup>3</sup> and more pronounced attempts to bolster relations with China, BRICS countries, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia or in fact Iran in an effort for revision of the world order and creating an opposition pole to the United States and generally Western world (Dutkiewicz & Kozhonov, 2016, p. 2 – 7). These views are shared with many other authors. Matt Finucane believes that while there is a long list of interests Moscow can protect from its cooperation with Tehran, it is the anti-imperialist stance is what cements the countries' relations (Finucane, 2016). Although framed differently, Russian observer Ekaterina Stepanova (2016, p. 1 – 9) also argues that Russia's actions in the Middle East ought to be seen as Moscow's endeavour to break its strangled position on the world's stage and again build for itself a stronger position in the international arena.

Other scholars support the notion that the anti-US views as an important factor building the relations. According to Mohsen Milani "Tehran, like Moscow desires a multipolar world in which Washington does not have the final say". Milani focuses on Tehran's reasons to ally with Russia and while he views the common ground in Syria to be significant, it is the opposition to the US influence that is the most important. Furthermore, he believes that Iran has used its connection to Moscow as a leverage during its negotiations with Washington. (Milani, 2016). Milani's thoughts are followed by Mohammad Javad Zarif, the current Foreign Minister of the of Iran. In his article for the Foreign Affairs magazine, Zarif focuses on Tehran's more general desires of its foreign policy. While the tone of his article is distinctly cautious, and diplomatic, Zarif does criticise the United States for their efforts to create a unilateral world order after the end of the Cold War. The Minister views multilateralism as the only way and approach how to solve a complex and common issues and move forward regardless of the topic, refusing that these connections are of zero-sum nature. In the context of this research, he emphasises the importance of alliance creation, both short-term and long-term (Zarif, 2014, p. 49 – 59).

According to others, the Syrian Civil War is the important topic and area of convergence and that is the factor we should focus on the most. Ellie Geranmayeh and Kadri Liik (2016, p. 1 –

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<sup>3</sup> Russian officials have created a term for the post-Soviet countries as the so-called „near abroad“ and often times revert to this term when deemed necessary or appropriate (Humphrey, 2014).

4) in their article titled *The New power couple: Russia and Iran in the Middle East* cite protection of Assad's regime in Syria as by far the most pressing in the recent years and view the conflict as a major platform for the countries' rapprochement. Although they admit the unilateralism pushed by the United States is a pressing issue, the authors argue that it is the less ideologically tainted goals are the truly the most important ones when assessing the Russian-Iranian relations.

Others believe the cooperation grew from more domestic motives such as combating radical Islam or protecting its strategic and economic interests. Ronald Dannreuther in his article from 2012 believes we should not understand the recent process of strengthening ties between Russia and Iran as a process to bolster anti-imperialist efforts. The author elaborates on domestic motives behind Russia's engagement generally in the Middle East with a specific look into Moscow's ties to Tehran in this context. The article highlights Russia's economic and geopolitical commitments and interests in the region, but he also devotes considerable attention to the issue of Islamic radicalism and its possible expansion or spill-over to Russia. Dannreuther (2012, p. 543 – 558) argues that anti-imperialism is not the defining factor for Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East, neither it is a space upon which Tehran and Moscow have built their relations on. Rather, throughout the relations between the two countries, Moscow has been able to achieve its vital interests. Even after the start of the Ukrainian civil war, Dannreuther (2015, p. 77 – 93) still views the previously mentioned domestic factors as essential to Russia's presence in the Middle East and its foreign policy in the region.

Rather than focusing on one particular theme, we should understand all the potential motives as Dmitri Trenin believes. Trenin argues that both anti-imperialist ambiences as well as a long list of tangible economic and strategic interests of the two countries are important and brings a contribution to the process of bolstering relations between Tehran and Moscow (Trenin, 2016).

With all that being said, many scholars point out that the relationship is not as solid as it might appear from the surface and that there are serious limitations to the prospect of further deepening ties. Authors cite past dealings as possibly the most crucial obstacle to the formation of a strong pact. Observers of the ties, regardless of them being Iranian, Russian or

from elsewhere, view one point with almost unshakable certainty - Russia and Iran have had complicated a relationship in the past, a fact that fully translates into modern-day relations between the two countries and their development (Bugaeva, 2008, p. 31 - 33; Ganji, 2016; Katz, 2012, p. 54). Some scholars argue its essentially the whole shared history of the two nations that burdens the relationship as both countries saw each other in the position of a foe as well an ally, several times over. These events created a deep mistrust, mainly coming from Tehran (Milani, 2007, p. 328; Andreeva, 2007, p. 15).

On the note of common heritage, several scholars focus on the era since the Iranian revolution, viewing it as a defining era for modern-day ties between Moscow and Tehran (Akbar, 1986, p. 61 – 63; Rakel, 2007, p. 159 - 167 & 179 – 180; Kozhanov, 2015, p. 4 - 8). Mark Katz (2012, p. 55 – 63) goes into detail and views the era since the Iranian revolution as problematic and in itself detrimental to Russian-Iranian ties. Katz argues that after the revolution, the countries went through a truly hostile period followed by a thaw and repeated the process again. Prior to the Arab Spring, the Russian-Iranian ties were plagued by bad foreign policy decisions and misunderstandings. Regardless of whether the past 200 years or just a few decades were important to the relations, Michael Rubin sums up the past dealings by stating “[t]he bitterness among the Iranian population [towards the Russians] never receded far” (Rubin, 2016).

According to some, the list of limitations continues. While some cited Assad’s survival as an area of convergence upon which the two nations can build their relationship, others believe the Syria issue to be eventually an Achilles heel in the process of rapprochement. Sam Eastoe and his colleagues (2016, p. 4 – 5) argue that Moscow and Tehran have very different interests in Syria and reasons for supporting the current regime. It is the divergence of goals, which is a limitation. Others view Russia’s diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia and Israel, Iran’s biggest foes in the Middle East, as worrisome. Nikolay Kozhanov and Mark Watz (2016, p. 6 – 7) argue that Moscow’s ties to Riyadh and especially Tel-Aviv has prevented from promoting the Russian-Iranian relations and left the Iranian side continuously frustrated.

The areas of common ground, as well as limitations, caused many to speculate on the existence of an alliance between the two countries. Generally, there are three opinions on



the matter. First of these views see the common ground between the countries strong enough, we can speak about not only an existing alliance, but a strong one at that. Geranmayeh and Liik (2016, p. 1 - 11), while being aware of limitations the relationship holds, are adamant that a rather strong alliance between Moscow and Tehran has been created. They argue the bonding agent to be mainly their common goal in Syria and this pact should not be recognized as temporary. Not all would agree with these views and argue the two countries did form an alliance, but it is not built on solid ground. Mohsen Milani calls the partnership “uncomfortable alliance”, highlighting the relationship is built mainly on the convergent goal of keeping the US influence in the region in check, but any serious rapprochement has been burdened by historical link or divergent objectives of both governments (Milani, 2016). Last opinion group is sceptical, stating the past historical dealings, mistrust or simply goals and security interest that do not match up cannot give away to a full-fledged alliance (Dutkiewicz & Kozhanov, 2016, p. 9 – 14). Nikolay Kozhanov (2015, p. 14 – 17) further explains with any serious commitment, Moscow would seriously damage its diplomatic relations with other partners throughout the world. For such reasons, we should not see the cooperation between the two countries as an alliance of any sort and rather understand it as temporary joint efforts.

### 3. Historical context

This chapter will present the historical context of the Russian-Iranian relations until March 2011 – the breakout of the Syrian Civil War. Knowing the historical background is absolutely crucial to understanding the present-day relations Moscow and Tehran as already touched upon in the literature review.

#### 3.1. From the beginning of Russia-Iran relations until the Iranian revolution

The Russian nation can trace its first encounters with the ancestors of present-day Iranians more than a thousand years ago. Trade routes were established in the 9<sup>th</sup> century alongside the Volga River and the Caspian Sea further south. These routes were however severed during the Mongol invasion in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century and did not recover until mid 15<sup>th</sup> century, when first diplomatic relations were established between then the Muscovy State and Safavid Iran<sup>4</sup>. It was not until the beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> century the nations truly embarked on creating a common history. Tsar Peter the Great set out an aggressive foreign policy and hoped to create with Safavid Iran a military union against a common threat – the Ottoman empire<sup>5</sup>. However, these efforts took place in the background of deteriorating position of the Safavid dynasty that would collapse in the coming years. In the end, alliance was not form and Peter the Great used the situation to invade Caucasian coast on the Caspian Sea – specifically cities Darband and Baku and provinces through which present-day Iran accesses the Caspian Sea (Astrabad, Mazandaran and Gilan)<sup>6</sup>. These events set the bitter tone of relations between the two nations (Andreeva, 2007, p. 13 – 14; Kazemzadeh, 2008, p. 314 - 323).

Until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, ties between the two countries were nearly non-existent. When Catherine II assumed Tsar's position, the old expansionist agenda was restored. This resulted in the annexation of Georgia in 1801 which until then belonged to Iran. Russian-

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<sup>4</sup> Safavid dynasty was a ruling family that led territory encompassing the whole of present-day Iran and parts of Turkey and Georgia. This Empire lasted between 1501 – 1722 (BBC, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> We can recognize these first steps as alliance building, specifically on the premise of balancing as put by Walt.

<sup>6</sup> Russian Empire lost control over these provinces a few years later (Andreeva, 2007, p. 14).

Iranian clashes continued and resulted in a war and subsequently Russian victory in 1813. Russia gained control over the Caucasus region as well as the Caspian Sea. Iranians waited until 1826 and then launched an attack against the Russians. This attempt failed and cemented Iranian perception of Russia for centuries to come. The Treaty of Turkmenchay<sup>7</sup> was signed and Russia gained more territory in the Caucasus region – the present-day city of Yerevan and surrounding lands and the region of Nakhichevan (Andreeva, 2007, p. 14 – 17; Kazamzadeh, 2008, p. 323 - 339).

There were attempts for rapprochement and even building an alliance again during the 19<sup>th</sup> century but failed. Until the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russian Empire continued to enlarge its territories and Iran once again lost its land – mostly in Central Asia. Over the coming decades, Iran found itself on the front lines of conflicts between Britain and the Russian Empire. Elena Andreeva describes these events as “tug-of-war”. Both British and Russian governments attempted to gain support in Iran by approaching the ruling classes with programmes resembling foreign aid. Eventually, the Russians created efficient instruments to create a leverage over Iran with financial loans and the Persian Cossack brigade<sup>8</sup>, creating an asymmetric alliance between the two nations that later shifted into Russian rule over Iranian domestic and foreign affairs. Effectively, Russia colonized Iran. Russian rule in Iran continued until the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 when Russians gradually withdrew from the land (Andreeva, 2007, p. 14 – 21).

In the following decades, connections between the countries were sporadic and mainly based on the trade of goods. This trade however essentially ceased to exist by 1939 as Iranian government did not prolong treaties<sup>9</sup> between the two countries. The relations dropped to new lows and Tehran’s decision to side with Nazi Germany shortly before WWII did not help. Tehran decided to be neutral during WWII, but its stance was not recognized. Allied forces

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<sup>7</sup> This treaty is among Iranians a synonym for humiliation and defeat (Iran Review, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> These armed forces were founded and led by Russian military officers. These troops exerted influence among the Iranian statesmen (Axworthy, 2008, p. 213 – 214)

<sup>9</sup> Parts of these documents included provisions and clauses potentially enabling the Soviet Union to compromise the sovereignty of Iran (Iran Review, 2013).

with Tehran's permission used the territory for transits of military equipment and the end of WWII gave the USSR a strong footing in Iran for a brief moment. The Soviets made plans of deepening their influence in Iran at the expense of the country's sovereignty - attempts quickly recognized by Tehran. These moves pushed the countries apart until the early 1960s when Iran's government decided to balance relations within the bipolar world order as it felt the US' influence has grown over the point Tehran considered comfortable. Moscow immediately used the opportunity to advance the relations and started supplying Iran with foreign aid in a form of loans and later on, Soviets provided the necessary expertise to energy, industrial, agricultural and other projects. Economic and political ties were slowly deepening at this point and the trajectory of this development lasted until the 1979 Iranian revolution (Axworthy, 2008, p. 227 – 234).

### **3.2. The period between the Iranian Revolution and the break-up of the Soviet Union**

The Iranian revolution in 1979 brought genuine hope among Moscow's officials and equally pronounced fear among Washington's statesmen about the possibility of Iran tilting towards the Soviet Union. Iran could have become a stronghold of Soviet influence and alliance between them could be formed on two strong pillars both shared – balancing the threat from the United States and the anti-imperialist ideology. However, as Sharam Chubin points out by 1983, Soviet-Iranian rapprochement did not take place and it will not in the near future (Chubin, 1983, p. 921 - 923; Tarock, 2017, p. 519 - 520).

Shortly after Ayatollah Khomeini assumed power, the Soviet Union was labelled as an enemy of the new Islamic Republic. These views were based on long list of things, although most notably, Iranian leadership assumed its position due to the USSR's general approach to religion, the previous history the countries shared and Russian invasion into Afghanistan<sup>10</sup>. Khomeini branded the United States as the "Great Satan" and Soviet Russia as "Lesser Satan". The foreign policy of Iran followed self-explanatory "No East, No West" approach and created hostile relations towards Moscow (Tarock, 2017, p. 518 - 520; Katz, 2012, p. 55). Following

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<sup>10</sup> The Soviet invasion was seen from as a clear step to Iran's sphere of influence, where Russia's successor once again demonstrated its expansive tendencies (Mamedova, 2009).

years were marked by diplomatic disputes and deliberated hikes in prices of gas exported to the USSR. On the other side, Moscow was supplying at times Iraq with arms during the Iraqi-Iranian war. These cold relations went on for most of the 1980s, and any attempts for rapprochement were hampered by the country's political and spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. Until his death in 1989, Iran's approach towards the Soviet Union did not change and the cooperation between Tehran and Moscow remained sporadic (Mamedova, 2009).

After Khomeini's death, a thaw of ties between the two countries began to take place. The Soviet Union made a decision to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, easing the stress on the relations. Moscow and Tehran made several agreements on joined efforts that ranged from industrial constructions, infrastructure, energy supply projects, military cooperation and most importantly, nuclear power plant programmes (Mamedova, 2009).

### **3.3. The period between the break-up of the USSR and Vladimir Putin's first presidency**

The collapse of the Soviet Union changed the nature of international arena greatly. The new situation was welcomed by Tehran as Iran lost a major hegemon close to its borders and with it a potential threat. For many of Tehran's officials, this meant the new nations approachable on a more equal footing, the Russian Federation being no exception (Aras & Ozbay, 2008, p. 47 – 49).

The first interaction between newly independent Russia and Iran only followed the set course of the several previous years in accelerated mode. Shortly after the break-up of the USSR, tensions broke out among several groups in the newly formed countries. Crucial to this research were secessionist tendencies in Muslim-majority Chechnya. Fear circled Moscow of Iran's possible help to the separatist movements in the Caucasus, but Tehran supported Russia's territorial integrity. Similarly, Tehran's statesmen acted with the disputes over Nagorno-Karabach between Armenia and Azerbaijan, where Iran facilitated ceasefire (Thérme, 2014). Adam Tarock (2017, p. 520 – 521) argues that these initial steps created a common theme for a cooperation on one specific issue – the stability of Russia's "near abroad" and the Middle East.

Although cautiously, Russia and Iran began to build its relationship on economic and political cooperation. Both countries had much to gain from a potential alliance. Iran could further assist Russia by securing unstable Azerbaijan and balance the influence of Turkey as the regional hegemon. On the other side, the potential sales of sophisticated military equipment<sup>11</sup> and expertise of nuclear power plant construction from Russia was no less crucial to Tehran. Furthermore, Iran needed Russia's diplomatic capabilities to shield itself from United States' actions. Tehran and Moscow witnessed the expansion of US influence and presence in the Middle East and Russia's "near abroad" during the early 1990s with considerable discontent (Aras & Ozbay, 2008, p. 49 – 50; Freedman, 2000).

The relations between Russia and Iran continued to thaw during the following years. NATO's plans for expansion in Central and Eastern Europe and its operations in the Balkan countries drove Washington and Moscow apart. By 1995, it was clear that Russia and Iran will be forming a stronger bond between each other. Despite the pressures from the US, for example Gore-Chernomolov agreement<sup>12</sup>, Russia supplied Iran with nuclear reactors during winter 1995. This can be partially attributed to Russia's search for an ally to balance the influence of the United States. By the end of the 1990s, both Tehran and Moscow began to view actions taken by Washington or NATO as a threat to their security and national interests. These years were seen as the highest point in Russian-Iranian relations in history. On top these points of convergence, Russia and Iran started to work together on territorial disputes around the Caspian Sea<sup>13</sup> (Thérme, 2014).

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<sup>11</sup> During the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and Gulf War, Iran was in dire need of sophisticated weaponry. Moscow as the only feasible source of high-tech military equipment (missiles, jet fighters, etc.) was crucial to Tehran. In return, Russia had a perfect market for its goods (Freedman, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> The agreement forced Russia, which tried to stay on friendly terms with the US, to limit its weapons sales to Iran and caused the projects and constructions related to nuclear power to slow down (Tarock, 2017, p. 522 – 523).

<sup>13</sup> It needs to be highlighted that their cooperation functioned during the moments both government though there are no oil reserves in the region (Katz, 2002, p. 69 – 71).

The two countries shared more common ground and other adversaries. Both states viewed Taliban, which by 1996 took significant Afghan territories and other Sunni fundamentalist groups as a threat and conducted joint efforts to battle them. Russia also commenced a crucial construction of Bushehr Nuclear reactor, often mentioned as an important factor to the Russia-Iran relations (Aras & Ozbay, 2008, p. 51 - 57; Katz, 2002, p. 69 - 71).

### **3.4. The period between the Putin's first presidency and the beginning of the Syrian Civil War**

In 1999, Vladimir Putin became the head of the Russian state. In many ways, the already set trajectory of foreign policy continued. Moscow's relations with Washington continued to deteriorate over NATO enlargement and involvement in Serbian conflict. Putin's administrative decided to withdraw the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement – a clear obstacle to Russia's rapprochement with Iran. The anti-US narrative became more pronounced and with it and the cooperation between Moscow and Tehran significantly accelerated. Arms sales to Iran experienced notable increase and Russian officials stated that the construction of Bushehr nuclear power plant is a priority and other similar projects might follow. Observers labelled the relationship at this point as “strategic alliance” (Katz, 2002, p. 69 – 72). In the context of Stephen Walt's theoretical framework, the two countries balanced a common threat – the United States and its foreign policy. Certain kinds of foreign aid in a form of arms sales or construction of nuclear power plant certainly helped to further bolster this alliance.

There were some setbacks to this rapprochement in the early 2000s, namely the Caspian Sea as oil reserves were in fact found in the sea bed. Tehran decided to disrupt British Petroleum exploration in the region by its navy in Azerbaijani territory. As a result, Baku sought support in the US. For Russia, this meant a potential risk of bringing US influence into the mentioned “near abroad”. In other words, Moscow did not enjoy the efforts of Iranian navy and criticized Tehran for its actions, temporarily restricting weapons sales to Iran (Katz, 2002, p. 73 – 78).

Since then, not much has changed until Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the Iranian presidential election in 2005. Ahmadinejad has been well-known for its anti-American sentiment and Russia leadership expected this shared view and the common threat will be the ground the two countries will form a strong alliance on. Moscow's statesmen decided to further promote

the alliance with supplying Iran with various forms of foreign aid – specifically Russia offered to enrich uranium for Iran’s nuclear reactor. At the same time, Russian envoy to the UN Security council protected Iran against the imposition of sanctions over the well-discussed nuclear issue (Katz, 2012, p. 56, Kozhanov, 2015, p. 5 – 6). According to Katz, Moscow demonstrated Kremlin can provide a diplomatic shield as long as Iran cooperated with Russia. This approach ultimately proved to be ineffective as Iran did not comply with several restrictions concerning its nuclear endeavours. This decision in turn put Moscow into an unfavourable negotiation position. The other UNSC permanent members drafted further resolutions punishing Tehran for its noncompliance, on which Moscow due to external pressure voted in favour of. Russian leadership managed to soften the punishments the sanctions brought to Iran, however it was not enough to persuade Iranian statesmen and public of Moscow being on Tehran’s side (Katz, 2012, p. 56 – 57).

Another setback concerned Russia’s assistance with the construction of Bushehr reactor – or quite specifically, the decision to delay the construction from Moscow. This caused serious discontent on the Iranian side and doubts of Kremlin’s resistance to Western influence (NTI, 2017; Katz, 2008, p. 203 - 204). Another topic creating friction were Russian sales of S-300 long-range surface-to-air missiles<sup>14</sup> to Iran. Initially, Moscow agreed to the deal and sales of these weapons, but under international pressure postponed the delivery dates and finally cancelled the order in 2010. The Iranian officials interpreted Kremlin’s steps as not being able to withstand the pressure from the West and its desire to maintain good relations with Israel<sup>15</sup> (Tarock, 2017, p. 532; Kozhanov, 2015, p. 5 - 6).

Moscow’s officials strived for better relations and tried to lend its support wherever it could to improve its image among Iran’s officials and common Iranian citizens alike. After Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s re-election in 2009, Moscow expressed support for Ahmadinejad. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs regularly made statements assuring the rest of the world Iran does not seek to develop its own nuclear weapons and trying to convince members of UNSC to

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<sup>14</sup> Acquisition of these missiles was strongly opposed by the US and especially Israel (Al Jazeera, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Russia maintains close ties with Israel, a fact that has been a long-debated issue in the context of Russian-Iranian relations (Eastoe et al, 2017, p. 10 – 11).



ease sanctions against Tehran (Sezer, 2011; Cronin, 2012, p. 390; Katz, 2012, p. 60). Once again, these diplomatic efforts did not pay off. Despite Russia's efforts, immediate bolstering of ties did not happen. Ahmadinejad, at this point unpopular among many, was perceived as too Russian leaning<sup>16</sup>. Re-elected president combated this image already in winter 2009, distancing his administrative from Moscow where possible (Katz, 2012, p. 60 – 62; Cronin, 2012, p. 377 – 378).

### **3.5. Summary**

Russian-Iranian relations have been complicated, to say the least. Russia was perceived in Iran at times as a threat and an expansionist force that have often times in the past intruded into Iran's affairs, annexed its territory and generally humiliated the nation on more than one occasion. On the other hand, last couple decades taught us that Moscow can value its relationship with Tehran and it was Russian officials, who mainly tried to support rapprochement with Iran.

Naturally, the historical legacy has influence minds of the Russian and Iranian public and officials alike and has affected their decision making. As will become clearer in the upcoming chapter, Tehran has approached Moscow with a certain caution and suspicion ever since. The country fears of being yet again marginalised by Russia. Although many matters will change since the Arab Spring events started, the suspicion will remain (Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016, p. 2 – 12; Eastoe et al, 2017, p. 3).

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<sup>16</sup> Moscow and its historical legacy has not been perceived well and over 93% of Iranians had at this point negative views of Russia (Katz, 2012, p. 60).

## **4. Development of Russia-Iran relations in the context of the Syrian Civil War**

This chapter will discuss the development of relations between Russia and Iran since the beginning of Syrian Civil War in the March 2011 until the 2017 US presidential elections. This part of the thesis will uncover the new shared interests and common ground created since the beginning of the Syrian conflict. In the context of presented theoretical framework the chapter will introduce the issues upon which Iran and Russia bolstered their relationship and created an alliance between each other. Sticking to the theory, this part will also try to challenge the ideas put out by Stephen Walt. Lastly, the limitations the relationship has and the effects these drawbacks have to the alliance will also be presented.

### **4.1. Common ground and interests**

When assessing the development of Russian-Iranian relations, many observers view the start of Arab Spring and most crucially the breakout of the Syrian Civil War as detrimental to the ties between Tehran and Moscow. While there can be certain reservations towards this opinion, these events undeniable changed the nature the countries cooperate with each other. Firstly, I will present common ground that predates the Syrian Civil War but is no less significant during the time window of this research. This information will be followed by new spaces for cooperation that would not have been possible without the Arab Spring or the Syrian conflict. The goal of this subchapter is to present a well-rounded picture of the factors that contributed an alliance formation between Moscow and Tehran.

One of the most crucial bonding agents remains the anti-US sentiment. Iran already entered the period of Arab Spring with generally bad ties with Washington and Moscow's relations with the US were in a declining trend essentially since Vladimir Putin assumed office in the early 2000s<sup>17</sup>. However, the downhill trajectory of US ties with Russia and Iran became more

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<sup>17</sup> This gradual worsening of US-Russian relations has been documented in Russia's national security doctrines it published over the years. The tone of these texts bearded more anti-US sentiment with each new version from 2000 until 2015 (Ministerstvo Innostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federacii 2000; Ministerstvo Innostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federacii 2009; Sovet Bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federacii 2015).

pronounced immediately after the Arab Spring (Malashenko, 2013, p. 5 – 6; CNN, 2011a). This point of view held by Moscow and Tehran has a long list of reasons, but generally can be summed up as US efforts to create unipolar world order where other actors are marginalised (Tarock, 2017, p. 534). UN-sanctioned intervention into Libya in 2011 set a tone for US-Russian and US-Iranian ties in the wake of Arab Spring. Both Iran and Russia are often critics to what they see as Western-led regime changes<sup>18</sup>, a claim going hand in hand with the narrative of US' efforts to rule unopposed in the international arena. While Russia abstained from voting in the UNSC on the application of Responsibility to Protect framework (Pillar III), the results of NATO's actions in Libya were not received well in Moscow (nor Tehran). Officials of both countries accused US and NATO of overstepping their UN mandate and pursuing US-tilted regime change. More importantly, NATO's actions in Libya were perceived as yet another attempt to bolster US influence in the Middle East, threatening national security of both Iran and Russia (Darrentheur, 2012, p. 544; Tahir-Kheli, 2011).

The topic of regime change naturally transfers to the discussion surrounding the Syrian Civil War and the position assumed by Tehran and Moscow. With the breakout of the conflict and in the context of recent events in Libya, both governments assumed a hard-line tone about the necessity not to interfere with the Syrian state sovereignty, while strongly expressing support for al-Assad's regime (BBC, 2012; CNN, 2011b).

Still on the Syrian issue, Russia and Iran have one more strong point of convergence – Islamist radicalism. Individually, both countries have had issues with radical Islamist groups originating both domestically and moving from abroad. The potential collapse of the Syrian regime might mean a spill-over of radicals into Russia or Iran. Both have a vested interest in preventing such scenario (Geranmeyek & Liik, 2016, p. 3 – 4; Dannreuther, 2012, p. 543 - 546).

A series of economic interest are equally important, and trade also makes a significant mark in the process of deepening relations or even creating alliances. Firstly, Iran still imports

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<sup>18</sup> Iranian officials oftentimes mention the coup d'état of 1953, when US government toppled Tehran's leadership and installed US-friendly regime. Moscow views the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and removal of Saddam Hussein from power through a similarly negative lens (Eastoe et al, 2017, p. 5).

technology of all kinds from Russia. Arms sales are often the most talk about subject and Russia plays a pivotal role as weapons supplier for Iran (Eastoe et al, 2017, p. 7 – 8). In the technological trade, Russian know-how in nuclear energy is also greatly appreciated in Iran as well as Moscow's diplomatic capability to influence UN sanctions imposed on Iran in this sector. Tehran has viewed the development of its nuclear energy infrastructure as fundamental to its national security and as such, Moscow's capabilities have been valued (Kozhanov, 2015, p. 12 – 14; Ghoshal, 2016).

Together with trade, economic ties have been also an important topic in the common ground theme due to which, the countries have been able to proverbially inch towards each other. The so-called Iranian nuclear deal helped to lift sanctions, which in turn will allow for more business to enter the Iranian market. Russian trade and business can benefit from this shift significantly (Ghoshal, 2016).

#### **4.2. Opportunities and prospects for alliance creation**

Knowing the areas of convergence and possible space for cooperation between Russia and Iran, we can examine the development of their cooperation, the way the common ground has materialized into the shared ties and finally, areas of joint activities that could be recognized as an alliance.

Immediately before the Arab Spring events, the relations were weak and volatile. The past dealings have brought mistrust towards Russia from Iran and in realpolitik term a sense of superior power with tendency to expand its scope of influence onto other nations. The past has very much resonated among the Iranian officials as well as public. Combined with the very recent development surrounding UN sanctions and Russia's stance on the issue and Medvedev West-leaning presidency, Tehran nor Moscow were not excited into entering any large-scale partnerships with each other (Katz, 2012, p. 60 – 63; Dutkiewicz & Kozhanov, p. 4 – 6, 2016).

However, the Arab Spring brought a change. Moscow experienced a loss of an allied nation – Libya, in the region and coupled with other factors, Kremlin's officials started to change the country's foreign policy which in turn affected the ties between Russia and Iran greatly in the

coming years. The breakout of the Syrian Civil War aided to Russia's changing foreign strategy. With Vladimir Putin assuming presidential seat in Kremlin in 2012, the relations between Tehran and Moscow began to improve and followed the new trend. It is widely accepted that the Ukrainian crisis further stimulated the growing connection. Another major turning point took place in 2015, when Iran for the first in time in its existence allowed foreign armed forces to enter into Iranian territory, leaving anyone previously doubting the seriousness of the relations between the two countries convicted of Moscow-Tehran alliance pact (Eastoe et al, 2017, p. 5; Kozhanov, 2015, p. 1 – 10). By the beginning of 2017, observers of the situation commented on the ties as being at an all-time high. This is partially attributed to cooperation Moscow and Tehran demonstrated in different areas (Tarock, 2017, p. 533 – 534). With this being said, we may examine the exact factors leading up to the significant rapprochement.

Medvedev-led Russia strived for better relations with the US and other partners in the Middle East, hoping this would bring Moscow overall better standing in the world arena. This had a negative effect on ties with Tehran and resulted in Ahmadinejad's steps to cool Iran's affection with Russia as discussed in the historical overview (Katz, 2012, p. 60 – 62). However, as the landscape in the Middle East changed, so did the Russian will to pursue good relations with the West<sup>19</sup>. This softened the view held by Tehran and made Moscow more approachable. With Putin assuming the presidential seat in 2012, it became clear Russia started to look for new partners amongst revisionist or non-Western powers<sup>20</sup>. Just during this year, an unprecedented 170 diplomatic delegations visited Iran from Russia and vice-versa (Kozhanov, 2015, p. 8 – 9; Tarock, 2017, p. 523). This process became even more pronounced with the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea when further deterioration of ties between Russia and the West took place. This was a fundamental factor in the relations between Moscow and Tehran (Dutkiewicz & Kozhonov, 2016, p. 2 – 7; Finucane, 2016). Without doubts, the anti-US sentiment shared by both parties helped upgrade their relations and pave a way towards the often-mentioned alliance. Being put into the theory of Stephen Walt, this is a clear example of the two countries found a way to

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<sup>20</sup> These countries were for example amongst the BRICS, Shanghai organization for cooperation and Eurasian Economic Union members or in fact Iran.

cooperate in order to balance a threat. With that being said, the anti-US mood alone may not be responsible for deepening ties between the two countries.

Given the discussed areas of convergence, Syria is the next topic. Russia and Iran successfully built many bridges over the Syrian conflict. This common goal resulted firstly in more diplomatic efforts by Russia when Moscow exercised its permanent member privileges at the UN soil and specifically UNSC. Russian officials either vetoed or push through changes to various UN resolution concerning the issue of Syria. Later on, Moscow started to share military intelligence<sup>21</sup> with Tehran and coordinating joint operations in the region, specifically then in Syria. The two intelligence bureaus also collaborated in this context on issues in war-torn Iraq and equally troublesome Afghanistan, adding their cooperation will mainly target radical Islamist groups<sup>22</sup> (Struster, 2015; Tarock, 2017, p. 520 – 521; Odeyemi, 2016, p. 136 – 138). Intelligence sharing and diplomatic efforts were not all the two nations did to prevent Assad's regime losing ground in Syria. For the first time since the World War II, Iran permitted foreign armed forces to enter its territory. This decision has been called extraordinary and historic. In practice then, Tehran allowed Russian jet fighters to launch airstrikes into Syria from its Hamadan Airbase in the northwest of the country. This move provided Russian air force with flexibility and according to analysts, potentially allowing Moscow to spread its influence over the Middle East with much greater ease (MacFarquhar & Sanger, 2016). As mentioned by many, if we are to speak of a modern-day alliance between the two countries, it was formed here (Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016, p. 1 – 4; Finucane, 2016). This view would suggest that even a common goal can help form an alliance, challenging ideas of the presented theoretical framework. Walt does not take into account shared objectives as a

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<sup>21</sup> Steven Hall in his article examines the process concerning sharing intelligence with Russia in more general terms. Highlighting the volatile and sensitive nature of intelligence sharing, the author states that only countries with strong common goals and interests relying on solid allied basis are willing to undertake such steps (Hall, 2017). This would explain why Moscow and Tehran waited until summer 2015 to engage in such practice.

<sup>22</sup> The term "*Islamist group*" as understood by the Russian government is to an extent purposely vague. With hindsight, it is clear Russian air campaign also targeted Syrian opposition forces, while still claiming attacks on radical Islamists (Al Jazeera, 2016).

contributing factor into the alliance formation process, yet this case can prove otherwise. That is if we do not consider the opinion claiming Russian actions in Syria have been at least to an extent an effort to re-emerge onto the world's diplomatic scene and in a way oppose the US and its influence in the region (Stepanova, 2016, p. 1 – 9).

The Caspian Sea should also draw our attention as it presents another example of joint efforts by both nations, balancing an outside threat. Although overshadowed by the Syrian conflict, this water basin created another platform over the past years for deepening ties between the two countries. As mentioned in the historical overview, Russia and Iran have had some indifferences how to handle territorial disputes over this water mass. That being said, both governments have worked on one particular goal together in this region – pushing any NATO or US presence out of Caspian Sea waters. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have worked closely with the Western governments essentially since the breakup of the USSR and by Autumn 2014, governments of Astana and Baku expressed their willingness to accommodate NATO naval forces in the Caspian Sea and in the case of Kazakhstan even creating a naval base (Dottoni, 2014). Moscow and Tehran<sup>23</sup> saw this possibility of a direct threat and were quick to state that no foreign military presence in the Caspian Sea is welcomed. A series of joint naval exercises in the Caspian Sea by the Russian and Iranian fleet followed (and were regularly repeated), making sure NATO and the US not to even consider deploying their forces in the area (Finucane, 2016; Sputnik News, 2015, Azernews, 2017). Getting back to the theory, Russian-Iranian alliance has successfully deterred a threat in their respective spheres of influence.

The general rapprochement of Iran and Russia can be witnessed in different areas as well. Closely watched are arms trades between the two countries and so they should be. Russia and Iran developed separate kind of relationship in this sphere over the years, however, as with other topics, the shift in relations has been noticeable in regard to the movement of

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<sup>23</sup> Both Russia and Iran view foreign military presence near their borders, especially NATO or US, as a major security threat. Furthermore, Moscow fears a potential pipeline construction from Turkmenistan through Azerbaijan into Europe, bypassing Russia and thus losing influence over the strategic gas supply into the Old Continent (Detonni, 2014).

Russian arms into Iran. The Iranian purchases of Russian S-300 surface-to-air missiles have gained serious notoriety due to the strategical and military importance this trade has<sup>24</sup>. There has been a debate on the matter before the Arab Spring with Russia ultimately cancelling the trade before of US and Israeli pressures, but with the general shift in Russian foreign policy, sale of these weapons once again reappeared at the negotiating table. The Iranian order for the missiles came in 2010 and after lengthy discussion over the terms of the transaction, Kremlin approved the sale during July 2015 (Gady, 2016a). This again emphasized the time the two governments needed to upgrade their own relations in order to go through with this strategically important deal. The missile purchase aside, there has been other evidence of improving relations at least in the arms trade sphere between Moscow and Tehran. The two sides have also engaged in negotiations over other high-tech weaponry during winter 2016, when Iran and Russia made announcements stating both sides have been preparing contracts on jet fighter SU-30 Sukhoi<sup>25</sup> purchases (Gady, 2016b). Once again, this deal is absolutely vital to the Iranian side for a number of reasons. With the assistance of S-300 missiles, modern Russian jet fighters will help further deter any ambitions of foreign powers to cross into Iranian airspace and conduct any sort of military air campaigns. Furthermore, Iran will be able to secure its influence over problematic regions like Syria by backing its troops with these aircrafts. Another side to the trade is clear from the Iranian Minister of Defense stating that “[a]ny sort of cooperation with the selling side should be conditioned upon technological partnership and joint investment”, signaling the necessity to further deepen cooperation with the Russians. In the terms of the arms trade, both sides also started to discuss future sales of Russian tanks into Iran. The negotiations have been so far successful (Gady, 2016b). Even here, Walt’s theory applies. I argue these trades to be a form of foreign aid and as pointed out by Walt, foreign aid provision should really be seen as a balancing process. Russia has supplied Iran with high-tech arms, further boasting improving the relations and creating

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<sup>24</sup> The strategic importance of these missiles in Iranian hands is immense. By acquiring these weapons, Tehran is effectively able to deter any potential air campaigns of foreign forces over its territory. This fact is often put into the context of Israeli air force and their activities in the region (Nadimi, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Sukhoi S-30 jets are a „multirole fighter aircraft“. In practice, these planes will be able to fight against air targets (e.g. other enemy planes) or act as bombers and support troops on the ground (Air Force Technology, n.d.).



a sense of appreciation among Iranians. In turn, Iran with its newly acquired strategic weaponry gained possibly more presence in the region and jointly with other revisionist power create a better opposite pole to the shared adversaries – most important being the US. Furthermore, Russia is the only high-tech arms supplier in the world willing to deliver its goods to the Iran. Moscow can easily create an atmosphere of being unexpendable to Tehran and tilt the alliance preferences (Geranmeyeh & Liik, 2016, p. 9).

I would continue to argue that similar theoretical approach applies to Russia's nuclear power plant projects in Iran. As discussed, nuclear energy has been the main topic in Russia's technology and Iran theme and Bushehr reactor has been at the epicentre of this discussion. Although this project started long before the breakout of Syrian War, it was completed in 2012<sup>26</sup>. The talks between the countries on deepening this cooperation continued after finishing the reactor. Iran with considerable backing from Moscow joined EU+3 talks (otherwise known as the Iranian Nuclear Deal) in Geneva during November 2013, which helped Tehran further pursue its goals in the nuclear energy sector – naturally with Russia. Russian state nuclear energy company Rosatom announced with Iranian officials in September 2016 construction of additional reactors at the Bushehr facility<sup>27</sup> (NTI, 2017; Kozhanov, 2015, p. 13 - 14). Bushehr nuclear plant construction and Russia's diplomatic efforts have been a factor to the alliance formation between Tehran and Moscow. However, here the theory runs short as Walt's theoretical approach does not provide backing for this claim. The cooperation mainly stemmed up from economic and energy interests and the theoretical approach does not recognize these shared goals as a contribution into the alliance formation (Paulraj, 2016, p. 99 – 107).

In the general push for multipolar world order, Russia and other countries around the have been trying to create platforms upon which non-Western actors can develop their economies

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<sup>26</sup> Lifting sanctions under the "Iranian nuclear deal", which was influenced by Russia, helped the issues of insolvency (Finucane, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Noteworthy is Russia's and Iran's cooperation on processing hydrocarbons<sup>27</sup> since 2013. This cooperation also includes joint projects on gas and oil production, all vital commodities to their economies (Eastoe et al, 2017, p. 14).

and influence world's financial systems. Examples may be seen in groupings such as BRICS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (further referred to as SCO). SCO with Russian backing has already started to negotiate Iran's potential admission matters, which again in the theoretical prism could be recognized as a certain balancing process. Current economic ties between the two nations are troubling. While in some areas trade risen substantially (arms and nuclear power plant contracts), overall the numbers suggest a volatile nature of trading volume. The traded amount peaked in 2012 at over \$2 billion and by 2015 fell to dismal \$690 million (Parand, 2017; Kozhanov, 2015, p. 9; Garrie, 2017). This has been mainly caused by low oil prices and Western sanctions inflicted on Russia's economy. Witnessing the sharp fall, officials from Moscow and Tehran signed a five-year accord in August 2014, planning joint actions by both governments mainly in the natural resource processing industries with the sole goal to increase commodity trade. This agreement set out a plan of Russian assistance with the Iranian oil trade while rolling out Russian construction projects for energy infrastructure in the Islamic Republic. In more plain terms, this agreement has allowed Tehran to export about 500 000 barrels of oil<sup>28</sup> a day into Russia and in return receiving various kinds of technology, goods and technical services (Trotman, 2014). This side of cooperation could be recognized as a contributing factor to the alliance creation, however here again, Walt's theoretical approach does not provide us with answers.

#### **4.3. Limitations to the relations**

Clearly, ties between Moscow and Tehran improved radically since the breakout of the Syrian Civil War and cooperation between the two countries spruced up in numerous important and strategic areas, suggesting this "friendship" is nearly unshakable. However, such point of view would ignore many issues. This subchapter will introduce the limitations or general burdens to the ties between Tehran and Moscow and the way these problems have translated into their ties. The theoretical insights will be left out in this part as Walt's theory takes into account factors that help pave the way alliance, not the other way around.

As it became clear from the chapter presenting historical context of the two countries, past dealings between Moscow and Tehran were for the most part on a swing. Many observes

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<sup>28</sup> During summer 2014, 500 000 roughly equal to one fifth on Iranian oil exports (Trotman, 2014).

thus see the history the two nations share as one of the biggest burdens the relationship holds. This is true coming especially from the Iranian side, where mixed feelings about Moscow run high, to say the least. There are several powerful sections within the Tehran's leadership viewing ties or alliances to Russia through different lenses and as such are either more or less keen to cooperate with Moscow. Possibly the most powerful section is represented by the army officials, who are in many ways connected to high positions and decision-makers within the Iranian army. This has been crucial to the relationship as this also happens to be the fraction viewing an alliance with Russia in the more positive connotations. However, with this being said, other parts of the Iranian leadership have expressed different positions over time and most crucially, the Iranian public does not hold favourable opinion towards Russia and any large-scale partnership Moscow has built with Tehran. Among other factors that will be discussed further, this has prevented Russia and Iran building a more robust alliance that could be even officially recognized by both sides (Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016, p. 8 – 10).

History is not the only factor that is harming the relations. Once again, Tehran has its doubts and fears about cooperation with Russia on large scale as the country might be overshadowed by the diplomatic power Moscow holds. The Iranian leadership has often scaled back in some areas of cooperation, fearing Washington's position of influence could be simply shifted to Moscow and Tehran would once again lose its regional hegemonic position. Iran has been varied of this possibility, which can bring up an example of already mentioned Russian-led airstrikes into Syria from Hamadan base in Iran. As mentioned previously, the decision of Iranian government to let foreign power into the country has been unprecedented since the WWII and as such sent a powerful message into the world and immediately was put up as a perfect example of strong ties between the two countries. Furthermore, the step meant Russia could much more easily spread its influence in the region (MacFarquhar & Sanger, 2015; Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016, p. 4 – 11). In order to keep Russia power ambitions at bay, Tehran quickly scaled back and after only a couple of days cancelled its permission to use the base (Barnard & Kramer, 2016). Iranian officials once again made the base available to Russian forces after another three months (Cone, 2016). These series of decision clearly highlight the mistrust towards Moscow and a very cautious approach and showcase that Iran, if interested in an alliance, will not accept any sings of bandwagoning. Such alliance would prevent Tehran

from freely creating and making its own decisions that have not been tainted by Kremlin's agenda.

One of the large issues in the contemporary Russia-Iran ties is actually their cooperation in Syria and the efforts to save al-Assad's regime. While both countries fully agree that the Syrian government should not be changed, they follow different interests of their own by protecting the Syrian regime. We can begin with the Russian point of view. It is widely argued that Moscow has a list of economic, diplomatic and strategic interest it has been trying to reach by its actions related to the Syrian conflict. First of all, in the efforts to create multipolar world order, observers of the situation believe Russia to exercise its diplomatic and military power to create a leverage for itself onto the world diplomatic stage. This argument further suggests that the exact outcome of the Syrian Civil War does not appear nearly as crucial for Russia as it does for Iran as Moscow is simply using the situation to demonstrate its capabilities. In this sense, Russian officials already suggested they would support federalization of Syria or even new elections in order to manage the conflict. Both of these proposals are unacceptable for Iran, which will be discussed below. That is not to say Russia does not have any tangible interest in Syria. Assad's regime is a guarantee of Russia access to a naval base of Tartus, Moscow's only trouble-free<sup>29</sup> access point into the Mediterranean. Moscow also has an interest in keeping Syria territorially integrated and the current government is to some extent a guarantee of stability in this respect to some extent. In Russian eyes, stable Syrian leadership is able to manage the issue of radical Islamist groups and their movement abroad, potentially to Russia<sup>30</sup> (Stepanova, 2016, p. 1 – 9; Finucane, 2016; Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016, p. 4 – 6).

Iran has a different goal behind protecting the Assad's government. Unlike Moscow, Tehran has much clearer objective regarding the exact individuals that should assume the leading

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<sup>29</sup> Russian navy has a number of naval bases around the Black Sea. If they wish to leave this water body, its ships need to cross Bosphorus and Dardanelles with the blessing of Turkey, a NATO member (Chuma, 2016).

<sup>30</sup> Large groups of Russian nationals, particularly from the Caucasus regions allegedly joined some of the radical groups such as DAESH/ISIL and potential return of these individuals is a threat to Moscow and generally a destabilizing factor (Yarlykapov, 2016, 7 - 11).

roles in the Syrian government. Bashar al-Assad is a key person in this objective. His government is formed mainly from an Alawite ethnic group which also belongs to the Shia wing of Islam. Iran is also Shia-dominated and in the context of power struggles through the Middle East, Tehran has a significant interest in keeping the current government standing<sup>31</sup>. Tehran views any efforts to federalize the country with certain discontent as the current Shia government would lose some of its influence over its territory. Neither the possibility of early elections has not been received well among Iranian high rankers as yet again, there is a risk of losing a Shia-governed Syria. Having a well cooperating partner alongside the religious basis has serious consequences as Tehran channels its personal and material help to other allied Shia-dominated entities. Iran heavily supports Lebanon-based Hezbollah through Syria and its regime, which in turn has helped to mitigate Tehran's threats coming from neighbouring Israel. Losing Assad's regime might mean losing this supply route to Iranian allies. Furthermore, with having Sunni-led Syria, Iran would very likely face Saudi backed opposition nearby to its borders at some point. Given these differences and divergent goals in Syria, the often-claimed strong common ground of the two countries should be questioned (Barfi, 2016; Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016, p. 4 – 6).

Middle Eastern power struggles have a much bigger impact on the Russian-Iranian relations than just impacting their cooperation over Bashar al-Assad government's fate. Beside cultivating ties with Iran, Russia is keen to cooperate with others. In the Middle East, other serious partners, Moscow keeps strong ties, are Saudi Arabia<sup>32</sup> and Israel<sup>33</sup>, both of which are on the top of Iran's "foe list". Tehran has watched these relations to develop and the level of

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<sup>31</sup> Syrian opposition – the likeliest of successors to Assad's regime is largely Sunni (Laub, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Ties with Riyadh are especially troublesome for Iran, as the country represents a Sunni-led US-backed hegemon in the Middle Eastern, a rivalry position to Iran and has supported other Sunni-led countries in the region, often at the Iranian expense. Russia treasures these relations as it directly affects its energy interests (Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016, p. 8; Miller & Brodsky, 2016).

<sup>33</sup> Over the past decades, over a million Russian/Soviet nationals left due to their Jewish heritage for Israel. This link to Russia forms on its own a very strong bond between Jerusalem and Moscow. Lastly, Russia has a long list of interest it protects with maintaining strong ties with Israel (Borshchevskaya, 2016).

commitment Moscow demonstrates to these nations has directly affected the mood within the Iranian government and its willingness to deepen its ties to Moscow. These power struggles along the religious line create tensions the other way around as well. Moscow has a domestic concern it needs to take into account. Majority of Muslim Russians belong to the Sunni wing of Islam and claim about 15% of the Russian population. Furthermore, in many instances these groups live in regions that have been susceptible to separatism. For these reasons, Moscow has actively tried to keep domestic relations with these regions and their population in check. In other words, this part of the population is vital to Moscow's decision making and as a Sunni majority, these groups have expressed discontent over Russia's deepening cooperation with Shia-led Iran. Getting to close with Iran would probably endanger ties with Israel and Saudi Arabia respectively and furthermore, the rapprochement might create tension within the Russian Muslim community at home (Kalb, 2015; Geranmayeh & Liik, 2016, p. 8 - 12; Yarlykapov, 2016, 8 - 11).

#### **4.4. Summary**

The Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran deepened their ties and cooperation considerably, especially when comparing their recent dealings to pre-Arab Spring eras. The anti-US stance and opposition to unipolar world order with all the actions it brought from diplomatic pressure with regards to Libya or deterrence of NATO presence in the Caspian Sea can be easily identified. Based on a number of evidence from intelligence sharing to crucial military joint efforts, this cooperation can be labelled as an alliance. Viewing this claim through the prism of Stephen Walt's theoretical framework, this is a textbook example of balancing a threat. With that being said, other forms of cooperation move beyond the anti-US stance and beyond the scope of the theoretical framework. Joint efforts to keep Assad's regime in power has been crucial to the rapprochement<sup>34</sup> as well as Russia's and Iran's ties in trade, especially then in the realm of arms and high-tech know-how<sup>35</sup>. Likewise, we should

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<sup>34</sup> That is if we understand common goals in Syria not to be a process of countering US influence in the region.

<sup>35</sup> Although as said, a case made for the applicability of Walt's theory and we can see Russian arms sales into Iran as a form of foreign aid and ultimately a process of balancing.

not dismiss the newly formed economic ties and Russian efforts to include Iran into wider economic groupings and frameworks<sup>36</sup>. As such, I would argue there are factors contribution into Russia-Iran alliance Walt's theory cannot to address.

As said, the relations improve dramatically, however there are burdens the ties have carried and the fact the alliance might not be as strong as this short summary might suggest. It is clear that many of the presented areas of convergence, some crucial, feature a "catch" of sorts. These drawbacks essentially prevented Russia and Iran to form an unshakable bond and left the alliance to be labelled as short-term or just opportunistic.

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<sup>36</sup> Once again, it needs to be reiterated that even the formation of economic cooperation has been to some extent shrouded with the efforts of deterring unipolar world order or to deal with Western sanction regimes.

## Conclusion

The relationship between Russia and Iran is complicated. It has been in the past and it continues to be despite the enormous steps the two countries made towards each other since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. With regards to the overarching question of this thesis, Russian-Iranian ties improved dramatically over the last couple of years and completely changed the dynamic of the relationship. However, that it is not the whole story.

By the time the Arab Spring brought about the first changes for rapprochement in the form of NATO intervention in Libya or deteriorating situation in Syria, Russian-Iranian relationship was at its lowest point in modern history, dealing with sense of betrayal and mistrust. Yet the coming years would bring a change. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the relationship hit two major milestones. First of them was in 2012, when Russia dramatically shifted its foreign policy and started to heavily focus on building strong relations with revisionists countries (Iran being one of them), while creating opposite pole to established Western powers, namely the United States. This course was further strengthened in 2014 during the Ukrainian crisis and implementation of sanctions against Moscow. During this time, Russia and Iran started to build up once again their relationship on common goals and shared ideas. I would argue that strongest of these convergent areas is their goal to counter US influence, which hides away several joint ventures of military, diplomatic and economic nature. These joint operations ranged from Russian and Iranian navies' missions in the Caspian Sea to forming ties in the economic and trade sector or Russia's diplomatic support during the Iranian nuclear deal negotiations. Much talked about collective actions in Syria from the diplomatic efforts to military operations can be put in the anti-US context as well, although that would be far from explaining the whole picture. In my opinion, any potential rapprochement of the US with either Russia or Iran might change the dynamic of the ties significantly.

Nonetheless, observing the cooperation that spruced up from various areas of convergence, I argue an alliance was formed between the two countries. Stephen Walt's theoretical framework aided with this claim as major parts of cooperation between Russia and Iran were



based on the process of balancing or the provision of foreign aid. That being said, I argue Walt's theory fails to take into account all factors that contributed into the alliance and furthermore, does not count on factors that might limit the pact as it is the case here. For the theory to completely cover all factors, the arguments would have to move past its clear realist basis combined with focus on external threats.

That leads us to the final and more troubling part of Russian-Iranian relations – its limitations. Despite the fact both nations have made serious steps towards each other, their relationship still cannot be called solid. Whether it's the bitter history and mistrust, divergent goals in Syria or Russian efforts to balance their relations with some of the biggest Iranian enemies, the consequences of these factors have prevented both countries from making a formal and unshakeable partnership. Unless officials in both Moscow and Tehran can resolve all of these issues, their relationship will never be outright friendly nor reliable and those, who might call it opportunistic or short-term will have facts to support their argument.

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