Dangerous Liaisons
Russian Cooperation with Iran in Syria

By Seth G. Jones, Nicholas Harrington, and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr.

INTRODUCTION
Following a June 2019 meeting with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Kyrgyzstan, Russian President Vladimir Putin remarked that “relations between Russia and Iran are multifaceted, multilateral.” In characterizing the primary areas of cooperation, Putin noted: “this concerns the economy, this concerns the issues of stability in the region, our joint efforts to combat terrorism, including in Syria.”

One example of Russian-Iranian cooperation is in Syria. This brief analyzes satellite imagery of Tiyas Airbase (or T-4) in Syria, which is used by Iran and Russia. It highlights what we assess to be the Iranian movement of weapons, other material, and personnel to Syria with the awareness and support of Moscow. This cooperation, which has allowed Iran and its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) to increase their capabilities and influence in Syria, should be concerning for the United States as tensions increase between Washington and Tehran. Yet Moscow’s cooperation with Tehran is double-edged. Our analysis also highlights Israeli attacks against Iranian or Iranian-linked targets at T-4 Airbase in close proximity to Russian aircraft. These developments suggest that Moscow is playing a delicate game in Syria. It supports Iranian activity and aid in Syria, but also explicitly or tacitly allows Israeli military actions against Iranian targets.

The rest of this brief is divided into four sections. The first provides an overview of Russian-Iranian relations. The second section analyzes satellite imagery of T-4 Airbase, focusing on the possible Iranian movement of arms, other material, and personnel. The third section highlights Israeli airstrikes in Syria, including at T-4 Airbase, in close proximity to Russian aircraft. The fourth provides a brief conclusion.

RUSSIAN-IRANIAN PARTNERSHIP IN SYRIA
Russia and Iran have developed a complex—and sometimes contentious—historical relationship. During World War II, for example, the Soviet Union occupied northern Iran, creating deep suspicion and mistrust among many Iranians. Yet Moscow and Tehran have developed a working relationship in Syria, even though they have their own interests.

Moscow’s decision to become directly involved in the Syrian civil war—including to work with Iran—was motivated by several concerns. First was a growing fear that Washington
was preparing to overthrow the Assad regime and replace it with a friendly government, much like the United States had done in Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003, and Libya in 2011. The possibility of losing Syria was particularly alarming because Moscow had just lost its ally in Ukraine. The 2014 Ukrainian revolution had ushered in a pro-Western government in Kiev, further fueling Russian fears of U.S. activity. Second, Syria had long been an important ally of Moscow. In 1946, the Soviet Union supported Syrian independence and provided military assistance to the Syrian Arab Army. This cooperation continued during the Cold War and endures under Russian President Vladimir Putin today. Third, Russian leaders were concerned that Assad’s collapse would allow the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and other terrorists to use territory in Syria and Iraq to attract more fighters, improve their capabilities, and spread terrorism in and around Russia. After all, over 9,000 individuals from Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia traveled to Syria and Iraq to join Salafi-jihadist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Fourth, Russian leaders were concerned that Assad’s collapse would allow the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and other terrorists to use territory in Syria and Iraq to attract more fighters, improve their capabilities, and spread terrorism in and around Russia. After all, over 9,000 individuals from Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia traveled to Syria and Iraq to join Salafi-jihadist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda.

Iran has its own interests in Syria. Following the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Iranian leaders became alarmed at the rise of Sunni extremist groups like the Islamic State and U.S., European, and Gulf support to rebel groups. In addition to providing light and heavy weapons to the Syrian regime and militias, up to 3,000 Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) helped plan and execute campaigns such as the 2016 Battle of Aleppo (or Operation Dawn of Victory). The IRGC-QF worked closely with the Assad regime and the Russian military, which conducted strikes from Russian combat aircraft and naval vessels in the Mediterranean Sea. Syrian forces and militias supported by the IRGC-QF shelled rebel positions in Aleppo as Russian close air support and Kalibr cruise missile strikes reduced entire neighborhoods to rubble. By December 2016, ground forces routed rebel forces, who departed under an agreement brokered by Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Iranian support continues today.

In addition, Iranian leaders have tried to use their activity in Syria to counter Israel. Perhaps the most significant example is by encouraging the expansion of Lebanese Hezbollah and other militia groups in Syria. Lebanese Hezbollah deployed up to 8,000 fighters to Syria and increased its arsenal with greater numbers and ranges of rockets and missiles from Syrian territory. Hezbollah also trained, advised, and assisted Shia and other non-state groups in Syria. Today, the IRGC-QF works with thousands of trained fighters in Syria operating in local militias. Many of these groups like Lebanese Hezbollah possess advanced stand-off weapons, improved cyber capabilities, more recruits, and more expansive forces in Syria capable of striking Israeli targets.

**Figure 1: T-4 Airbase**
While Russian-Iranian cooperation has been contentious at times, both countries have collaborated in Syria in ways that serve their own interests. One example of this cooperation is at T-4 Airbase, which is located in eastern Homs Governorate and roughly 100 miles northeast of Damascus.

**T-4 Airbase and Flight Tracker Data**

Figure 1 shows the base using satellite imagery. On the east side of the base is an apron (ramp) where aircraft, helicopters, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are frequently parked. On the west side is an apron where transport aircraft have been located and where Israeli aircraft have struck targets.

Satellite imagery in Figure 2 highlights a Russian-made Ilyushin Il-76-MD cargo aircraft on the base. This aircraft is likely the former Russian Airforce Il-76 registered RA-76634, as indicated by the number painted underneath the cockpit and livery of the aircraft. The imagery shows the freighter being loaded or unloaded under the protection of multiple Syrian air defense systems, including three SA-2 systems and a Pantsir-S1—all of which were provided by Russia.

We assess that the Il-76 and other commercial aircraft may have been used to transport weapons, other material, or personnel from Iran into Syria, based on the regular use of Il-76s for these purposes in Syria.

Flight tracker data of the Il-76 aircraft indicates a recent history of flights between Tehran and Damascus. As indicated on the wing, the plane is registered as YK-ATD. The Prefix (YK) is the Syrian country code. Other Syrian-owned Ilyushin Il-76 aircraft have similar registry codes, such as YK-ATA, YK-ATB, and YK-ATC. Publicly available flight tracker data indicates the YK-ATD makes regular flights between Tehran and Damascus. As illustrated in Figure 3, on May 13, 2019, YK-ATD departed Damascus International Airport. On May 14, 2019, the day we observed YK-ATD at T-4 Airbase, flight records indicate the plane left Tehran Mehrabad International Airport in the morning, arrived at what we assess to be T-4 based on imagery analysis, and then departed for Damascus International Airport in the afternoon. Our analysis of flight history for other Syrian-owned Il-76 aircraft indicates similar flight patterns between Iran and Syria for other aircraft, possibly for the purpose of clandestinely transferring weapons, other material, and personnel into Syria.
As shown in Figure 4, we identified four Russian fixed-wing Su-25 ground attack aircraft with full weapons loads at the same site as the Il-76 aircraft, as well as an Mi-17 Hip transport helicopter and an Mi-24 Hind attack helicopter. The proximity of Russian aircraft to the Il-76 suggests that Russia was highly likely aware of Iranian activity. It is virtually inconceivable that Iran would transport and unload arms, other material, and personnel to a base frequented by Russian aircraft and government officials—and protected by Russian-made air defense systems—without Moscow’s knowledge and approval.

The imagery also indicates three active air defense sites around the perimeter of T-4 Airbase. Figure 5 highlights one of these sites. All of the air defense sites are equipped with Russian-made weapons systems. The first SA-2 air defense site is situated to the north, another SA-2 air defense site is located to the northwest, and a third SA-2 air defense site is to the south. The SA-2 Guideline (Russian designation S-75 Dvina) is a high-altitude, command guided, surface-to-air missile system (SAM) capable of 360-degree coverage. The SA-2 Guideline is designed for the defense of fixed targets and field forces. The guidance system of an SA-2 site can only focus on one target at a time but can direct three missiles against a target simultaneously. This likely explains the need for multiple SA-2 systems around the airbase.

Also observable in the imagery is a Pantsir-S1 (NATO name—SA-22 Greyhound) transloader. The Pantsir-S1 is a short- to medium-range missile and anti-aircraft artillery weapon produced by Russia. The Pantsir-S1 provides point air defense for various installations and provides protection to air defense units. Figure 6 illustrates the Pantsir-S1 air defense system.

All military assets in the imagery are Russian made. We assess that the YK-ATD was likely either leased or sold to
Syria. The Su-25 combat aircraft, as well as the Mi-17 and Mi-24 rotary-wing craft, are likely Russian operated. The SA-2 Guideline and Pantsir-S1 are Russian-built SAM systems. These air defense systems are just two of numerous air defense systems provided by Russia to the Assad government. Others include S-75s, S-200s, S-300s, and Strela-1/-10s.

With Russian support, Iran has used these types of activities to expand its presence in Syria. Today, the IRGC-QF works with thousands of trained fighters in Syria who are operating in local militias, including Lebanese Hezbollah. The 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War demonstrated Israel’s difficulty of rooting out Hezbollah sites in Lebanon. Iran’s activity in Syria has only expanded the nature of this problem for Israel’s military.

**ISRAELI AIRSTRIKES IN THE SHADOW OF THE BEAR**

Despite Russia’s collaboration with Iran, Moscow has also attempted to placate Israeli concerns about Iranian expansion. This section highlights Israeli attacks against Iranian or Iranian-linked targets—including at T-4 Airbase in close proximity to Russian aircraft. These developments suggest that Moscow supports Iranian activity and aid in Syria, but also condones some Israeli military actions against Iranian targets. Russia and Israel have established deconfliction mechanisms, including a hotline between the Israeli and Russian militaries.

As one Israel Defense Force official remarked, “We are very strict about informing the Russians about our activities and that their operational picture is up to date.”

This cooperation is particularly important to avoid incidents like the one in September 2018. Following an Israeli strike against Iranian-linked targets in western Syria, Syrian gunners accidentally shot down a Russian Il-20 surveillance
aircraft. Russia complained that Israel had given Russian leaders less than a minute of advanced warning and Israeli aircraft used “the Russian airplane as a cover.” Despite some improvements in cooperation, Russia has occasionally condemned Israel for its actions in Syria. In July 2019, for example, Russia publicly criticized a series of Israeli strikes, saying that they “grossly violate[d] Syria’s sovereignty.”

Figure 7 plots the location of Israeli airstrikes against Iranian and other targets in Syria. The darker shades of blue in the heat map indicate a higher concentration of Israeli strikes. Most of Israel’s attacks have been in southwestern Syria, near the Israeli border. But a few attacks have been against major bases used by Iran and Iranian-linked groups, including T-4 Airbase, the airbase north of al-Qusayr, and Damascus International Airport.

On June 2, 2019, Israel conducted an airstrike on T-4 Airbase. This strike, along with similar strikes conducted in 2019, indicate that Israel is still committed to contesting attempts by Iran to entrench itself and its non-state partner forces in Syria. As highlighted in Figure 8, satellite imagery taken before and after the Israeli airstrike indicates that a UAV control vehicle, launch ramp, and ground equipment were likely targeted. This airstrike, which was conducted in close proximity to Russian infrastructure on the base, highlights the ongoing challenge Israel faces when conducting strikes near Russian forces.

CONCLUSION

The Trump administration has expressed significant concern about Iran’s nuclear ambitions, its missile program, and the activities of the IRGC-QF and its partner forces in the Middle East. One of the countries where Iran has been most active is Syria, where Tehran has increased its military presence to aid the Assad regime; supported Lebanese Hezbollah, which has been directly involved in the Syrian ground war; and expanded the number of rockets and missiles in the country to establish a second front (along with Lebanon) in a future war with Israel.
Yet Iranian actions in Syria have been possible, in part, because of Tehran’s cooperation with Moscow. Containing Iran and preventing further Iranian expansion in the Middle East will be difficult without increasing pressure on Moscow. If Washington wants to be more effective in containing Iran, U.S. policymakers need to put greater pressure on Moscow to curb Tehran’s movement of arms, material, and people—as this case study of T-4 Airbase highlights.

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ENDNOTES


10. Uskowi, Temperature Rising, 82.

11. See, for example: LutwaffeAS, “New IL-75 Syrian Air (leased or donated?) appears with new reg. YK-ATF, it means there is ATE also,” Twitter, May 8, 2019, https://twitter.com/LutwaffeAS/status/1126038846762881024. This Twitter account monitors Syrian Air Force activity.


14. See, for example, Starr, “Recent Iranian Shipments to Syria Concern U.S. Intelligence.”


