

Putin Now Needs a Plan B on Iran

Qassem Soleimani's death may force a change in the Russian calculus involving Syria, Iran and Turkey.

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Putin won't back any Iranian attempts at retaliation, but he will need to react if Iran does retaliate and the situation gets out of hand. [Kremlin.ru](#)

Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, killed last week by a U.S. drone in Baghdad, has been [credited](#) with persuading Russian President Vladimir Putin to intervene militarily in Syria in 2015, a claim the Kremlin denies. Regardless of the truth of that particular story, though, the inevitable escalation following Soleimani's death has the potential to change Putin's calculus in the region.

Commenting on Soleimani's demise, the Russian Defense Ministry [praised](#) his "indisputable contribution" to defeating the Islamic State in Syria. The ministry credited him for organizing an armed resistance to ISIS long before the U.S. created its own anti-ISIS coalition. Indeed, if it weren't for Iran's so-called [Axis](#) of Resistance, which includes the Hezbollah militia in

Lebanon and other regional armed groups, it would have made no sense for Russia to enter the Syrian conflict.

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Hezbollah and Iranian forces commanded by Soleimani provided the boots on the grounds that Russia was unwilling to spare, supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's bloodied and exhausted troops to turn the tables on Assad's enemies, including the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces. It was important to Putin that Assad didn't stand alone. If that were the case, he'd be easier to write off than to back.

Some analysts have [argued](#) that it's always been in Russia's interest to limit Iran's role in Syria, because the Kremlin has no control over Iran or Hezbollah. That argument, however, assumes that Russia wants control. Putin, for his part, never wanted to own the Syrian crisis, but rather to prop up forces willing to consider Russia's economic and military interests ahead of U.S. ones. That meant maintaining the status quo — and from Moscow, the Axis of Resistance, not just the Assad regime, was the status quo. Alexander Zasypkin, the Russian ambassador to Lebanon, said this in a March 2019 interview:

"I'll say it straight: The Iranian influence on the Syrian regime shouldn't be restricted. A strong, unshakable alliance exists among Damascus, Tehran and Hezbollah. It'll remain that way in the future."

At the same time, Russian diplomats and Putin himself have avoided calling Iran a Russian ally. To them, it was merely the central part of a geopolitical arrangement that they didn't want replaced with a pro-U.S. one. That's an important distinction. An alliance is defined by mutual commitments. But when it comes to the Iranian regime, Putin has avoided any kind of serious commitment. In an attempt to set himself up as a Middle Eastern mediator rather than part of one of the region's warring camps, he's cooperated with Iran's arch-enemy, Israel, and with Turkey, whose regional ambitions sometimes clash with Iran's.

Soleimani's death changes nothing about this basic setup. All Russia feels compelled to do is offer condolences, as Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov [did](#) to his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Javad Zarif; express concern, as Putin [did](#) to French President Emmanuel Macron; and [keep up](#) its military cooperation with Soleimani's successor, Esmail Ghaani. Putin won't back any Iranian attempts at retaliation.

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Yet he will need to react if Iran does retaliate and the situation gets out of hand. Russian military analyst Pavel Felgenhauer has even [likened](#) Soleimani's killing to the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914, the event that set off World War I. One possible scenario he described was an Iranian strike on Israel and an Israeli response against Iranian forces and proxies in Syria, which might endanger Russian troops. Putin has planned a visit to Israel this month; deconfliction in Syria will be one of the key subjects of his discussions with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

On a strategic level, further escalation between Iran and the U.S. might disturb the geopolitical balance that Russia intervened in Syria to maintain. That's something Putin wants to prevent with the help of European leaders. In addition to talking to Macron, he has [invited](#) German Chancellor Angela Merkel to visit Russia next weekend, with Iran atop the agenda.

Putin can't, however, discount the possibility of a full-scale war between the U.S. and Iran, a war the Iranian regime cannot win. In such a situation, Putin would need a replacement for the Axis of Resistance in Syria — some sort of arrangement that would make it unnecessary for him to commit more troops but prevent U.S.-friendly regime change, thus allowing Russia to maintain its military bases.

Putin's options for such an arrangement are currently limited to working with Turkey, the only other strong player in the region that isn't a firm U.S. ally. On Wednesday, Putin will visit Ankara to meet with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. They will have more urgent things to discuss than the launch of a new natural gas pipeline. Though Russia and Turkey have weighed in on opposite sides of the civil conflict in Libya, Putin and Erdogan have a proven ability to work together. Last year, the two cooperated when Erdogan launched a military operation against the Syria-based Kurds.

That Erdogan is Putin's only possible Plan B doesn't augur well for Assad. The Turkish president would prefer him gone, and if Iranian support ceases, Putin is more likely to seek a compromise with Erdogan than to keep propping up Assad. The Syrian ruler, ironically, must be praying fervently that the Iranians do nothing rash.

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