



The Cambridge Security Initiative

RUSSIA, IRAN STILL PARTNERS OF CONVENIENCE POST-SULEIMANI

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Despite talk of deepening strategic ties, Russia and Iran remain mistrustful partners of convenience often competing for influence—including in Syria, where together they prop up the al-Assad regime. In Russia’s global strategy of “divide-and-rule”, Iran and its proxies are valuable pawns against America and its regional allies. And an isolated Iran increasingly needs Russia’s security, economic, and political support.

In early January, Iran reacted to the targeted killing of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) [General Qassim al-Suleimani](#) by striking American bases in Iraq with ballistic missiles, [carefully aimed](#) to avoid casualties. Iranian missiles likely relied on [Russia’s GLONASS](#) system (instead of China’s [less accurate BeiDou](#)). Exploiting current tensions, Russia already seems to be discussing [more S-300](#) air defence unit sales to Iran, despite [performance concerns](#)—or even S-400s. This would build on a £408 million S-300 deal from 2007, [completed](#) in 2016.

Despite a 2014 agreement, Russia has not recently [bought Iranian oil](#) to help that country evade American sanctions, but instead allows Iran to use [Crimean ports](#) to ship oil via the Azov Sea and beyond. Tensions before and after Suleimani’s death raised oil prices, benefiting Russia’s state budget. It assumed a 2019 break-even price of [\\$49.20 per barrel](#) of Urals crude. However, the day after Iran’s missile strikes, Urals crude closed at [\\$61.75](#)—up \$2 per barrel since 27 December 2019.

Russia has put on a show of solidarity with Iran since Suleimani’s death. One example was a statement that the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation—Eurasia’s leading political, security, and economic organisation, of which Russia is a key member—would support a change in Iran’s status from observer to [full member](#). The most reckless display saw a Russian intelligence-gathering ship from the Black Sea Fleet move aggressively in the Arabian Sea toward a U.S. warship, [nearly colliding](#) with it.

OUTLOOK

Suleimani’s death weakens Iranian influence in Syria, a vacuum Russia is quickly filling. In the medium term, Syria and its warm-water ports will remain Russia’s strategic priority in the Middle East. Near term, Russia will benefit from heightened tensions between the U.S. and Iran. For example, 3,000 American troops due to take part in a March training exercise in Norway [have likely redeployed to the Persian Gulf](#)—a distraction from training for [Great Power competition](#).

However, Russia will not openly fight alongside Iran if it ends up in conflict with the U.S., either by crossing a nuclear threshold or by sponsoring proxy terror attacks.