

Re-Focusing on Iran-Russia Cooperation in the Syrian Crisis; A 'broader' Strategic Stability on Agenda

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Abstract

The main purpose of this article is to examine how and to what extent Iran-Russia cooperation is effective in ensuring 'broader' strategic stability through balancing in the Middle East. Strategic stability and balance of power are interrelated components of the region's order which have changed following the Arab Spring and the Syrian crisis. The article analyzes Iran and Russia's impact on these two concepts, with a systemic approach, paying attention to interrelationship of variables at regional and international levels. Although strategic stability has been generally considered an issue at international level of great powers politics, this paper, emphasizing on evolution of international relations, believes in a new, complex and multilayered definition of strategic stability - a 'broader' one in the Middle East, which is not necessarily ensured by agreements or balance among great powers. The results indicate that Iran-Russia cooperative balancing in the Syrian crisis against the US and at regional level with emphasis on a broad regional balance system has been effective in providing 'broader' strategic stability in the region. Although Russia's policy in this field put some limits on Iran, strategically it serves Iran's interests.

Keywords: Strategic Stability, Balance of Power, the Middle East, Iran, Russia, the US.

1. Introduction

The Middle East has been in turmoil in recent years. Different problems such as failed states, economic troubles, identity crisis, asymmetric threats like borderless terrorism, proxy confrontation, power competition, foreign interference and security dilemma has challenged security, economic, political and geopolitical orders in the region. In addition, the Arab Spring and the Syrian crisis, US declining power and emergence of new rising powers, which seek to improve their role has also exacerbated the situation. Iran and Russia are among new actors, who individually or jointly specially in the Syrian crisis have tried to make changes in their Middle East policy from passive to an active one.

Iran's influence in Middle Eastern politics is an emerging reality. Its political, economic and military rise has led to an assertive role, affecting events in different countries of the region from Syria to Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and Afghanistan. On the other side, longley absent from the Middle East, Russia is back in the top tier of Middle East power politics. In the Persian Gulf, North Africa and the Levant, it seeks to recreate the influence that it lost following the collapse of Soviet Union. Iran-Russia involvement and cooperation in the Syrian conflict, which took place against the backdrop of a United States pulling back from the Middle East and growing uncertainty about its future role there, was a pivotal moment for their Middle East policy.

They pursue different goals in the Middle East, one of the most important of which is to create a positive balance that ensures strategic stability and their long-term interests. Iran, due to its regional position and role, is involved in the issues of balance of power and stability in the Middle East. Realizing interrelationship between stability and security in the Middle East and the CIS region and its borders, Russia has also engaged in these issues.

Despite some differences, common understanding of risks and costs posed by instability has led them to work together more closely than before. This cooperation is an important development in the Middle East and its impact on balance and stability is visible in Syria. The US is a key factor in shaping this partnership. With an active revisionist approach, Tehran and Moscow have sought to provide stability through balancing the US and countering its destabilizing policies, for example in Syria. In addition, Iran and Russia are to define a new balance system, in the framework of which strategic stability will be provided with their greater participation and managerial

role. Tehran and Moscow's proposals to create a new security order in the Persian Gulf are part of this strategy.

Turmoil in the region and the US and Europe's declining power has created a good ground for Iran and Russia to improve their role as balancer. Paying attention to necessities and benefits of cooperation, they have tried to preserve balance and stability in the Middle East at both regional and international levels. Their cooperation has had its own limitations. US and its allies' reactions on the one hand and Tehran and Moscow's different and sometimes conflicting views, interests, policies and goals on the other, are among limiting factors which prevent them to easily extend this cooperation throughout the region.

Scholarly analyses of Iran-Russia cooperation in the Syrian crisis take a variety of perspectives on the issue. Emphasizing differences, some scholars examined the role and policy of Iran (Akbarzadeh,2017; Juneau,2018; Soltaninejad 2018) and Russia (Marten,2015; Pieper,2019; Rezvani,2020) separately. Downplaying differences, some others focused on regional dimensions of the cooperation (Joobani and Mousavipour,2015; Antonyan,2018; Divsallar,2019) and some others emphasized Iran's internationalization strategy aimed at engaging Russia in balancing the United States (Ahmadian and Mohseni,2019). Some authors highlighted Russia's superior position in this cooperation (Freire and Heller,2018; Thornton,2019; Wilhelmsen,2019). In this paper, with a systemic approach, we have attempted to develop a 'two-level understanding' of how Iran-Russia cooperative balancing is formed simultaneously at the regional and international levels to provide a 'broader' strategic stability. Accordingly, the main aim of the article is to analyze the connection between this cooperation and strategic stability in the region and the benefits and threats of Russia's policy in this field for Iran.

2. Methodology

Paying attention to interrelationship of variables at regional and international levels in the Middle East (Stetter,2008; Buzan and Wæver,2003), this research developed a set of research analysis criteria as following; the first one is systemic approach to ensure that all and main elements like structure, agents, relational and normative patterns, related to balance and stability in the Middle East will be considered. Also it uses the analytical-descriptive method to explore the evolution and complexity of international relations and the changes in regional and great powers' role in

providing balance and strategic stability in the region. Geopolitical method also will be used to study the triangle of power, politics and geography in the Middle East and the effects of cooperation between Iran and Russia in the geography of Syria on power equations, balance system and stability situation in the region.

3. Conceptual Framework: 'Broader' Strategic Stability and Balancing

There are various definitions of strategic stability and the ways to provide it. These definitions were initially limited to the macro/international level, focused on great powers relations, but have become broader with the evolution of international relations. So, definitions vary from hard balancing through nuclear weapons and arsenals to trying to manage regional political-security crises. These definitions can be divided into three general forms;

- most narrowly, strategic stability describes the absence of incentives to use nuclear weapons first (crisis stability) and the absence of incentives to build up a nuclear force (arms race stability)
- more broadly, it describes the absence of armed conflict between nuclear-armed states
- most broadly, it describes a regional or global security environment in which states enjoy peaceful and harmonious relations (Acton,2013:117-118).

The first and second definitions are weapons-oriented and rooted in the rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union. They focus on great powers balancing and agreements in areas such as weapons systems development, force employment and arms control policy, which designed to reduce the incentive for any party to strike preemptively. In this meaning, it is stability of deterrence, not strategic stability (Foerster,2018:3). Weapons-oriented analyses concentrate on how fluctuations in the balance of military power may affect the likelihood of war. In particular, issues such as increase or decrease in the number of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems, the potential vulnerability of nuclear forces, appropriate basing modes and doctrine, and the deployment and character of anti-ballistic missile (ABM) systems, have tended to be at the center of debate (Walton and Gray,2013: 86).

Schelling argued that nuclear parity was not enough to guarantee stability of any sort. It was the vulnerability of one side's strategic forces that perpetuated the need to maintain offensive nuclear postures. Therefore, stability is interdependent and is only possible when both sides can ensure

that they can possess a credible and survivable second-strike capability (Garcia,2017:354-355). The complexities of the second nuclear age, in which the number of nuclear actors has expanded and transition the world into a multipolar order have made the possibility of establishing strategic stability very difficult. States are strategically interdependent, as a result, the actions of any one actor can affect the strategic calculations of another. Therefore, the environment that was conducive to the establishment of strategic stability during the Cold War no longer exists (Garcia,2017:360).

Although the second definition is broader and includes issues such as reducing strategic weapons, confidence-building measures and transparency in military policies, it is still weapons/nuclear-oriented. So it cannot be adapted to contemporary changing conditions. Strategic stability today does not directly equate with the requirements of arms race, deterrence stability and crisis stability (Roberts,2017:63). Third definition emphasizes significant changes in international relations and in the geopolitical, technological, and psychological landscape that helped prevent war. Accordingly, to maintain strategic stability under rapidly changing and increasingly complex conditions, many long-standing notions and policies should to be adjusted to new condition, where threats, affecting strategic stability have been increased and diversified.

An updated definition of 'broader' strategic stability seeks ways to bar military confrontation between nuclear states; successfully manage global competition among great powers, and regional rivalries; exercise restraint in deployments and doctrines; and include the use of communications, confidence-building measures, and other conflict-prevention mechanisms to bolster stability (Trenin,2019:1). So, new definition covers new issues that are scattered in various social, political, economic and even environmental areas.

It is more important in the conditions of rising interdependence and mutual vulnerability among states. According to new definition, 'broader' strategic stability is not static and works in an environment of diverse and changing threats. This definition goes beyond the military/weapons framework and takes into account domestic and regional developments too. For example, economic, social and even migration crisis, affecting long-term political and security conditions are related to strategic stability. In this regard, NATO's 2012 Deterrence and Defense Posture Review lists growing strategic threats as regional conflicts fueled by states and nonstate actors, terrorism, piracy,

globalization, cyber threats, challenges to energy security, new weapons technologies and the proliferation of ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) (Foerster,2018:5).

These threats have different origins, especially in regional crises. So, local and regional wars and crises that have the potential to spread to international arena and asymmetric threats such as international terrorism are among new threats. As a result, tools and methods of dealing with these threats are different and diversified too. In the meantime, balancing is a common one that old and new definitions emphasize on it as an effective tool to provide strategic stability. Balance of power theory seek to explain the conditions that lead states to adopt balancing strategies, aiming at strengthening their security posture and also providing strategic stability (Wu,2017:806 & 810). Balancing is a very important element in first definition; hence Soviet-US Joint Statement on the Treaty on Strategic Offensive Arms presented strategic stability as “such balance of strategic forces of the U.S.S.R. and the U.S., where there were no incentives for a first strike” (Platte and Robinson,2018:146).

In the second definition, balance is also very important. However, given the increasing complexity of international relations, applying strategic balance model to great powers politics is not sufficient to ensure sustainable strategic stability. The solution is that great powers accept their limitations and the need for cooperation. Therefore, in addition to hard balancing to prevent tensions between themselves, they should be ready for cooperation to ensure strategic stability in a wider sense. Based on third definition, given the increase in challenges in international relations and complexity of strategic stability, balancing as a tool to provide it has also become complex. Such a tool should be effective in face of traditional and new threats as follows;

-Direct threats, which are susceptible to traditional strategic stability tools and treats, which may lead to a nuclear war.

-Indirect threats, which are asymmetric in nature like cyber warfare and may be countered by theoretical concepts such as mutually assured destruction (MAD).

-Intangible threats, which are those that are not physical or readily identifiable but can strongly affect human thought and decision-making. Information warfare is an example, which can conduct warfare in the adversary's mind and freeze decision-making is monumental.

-Emerging threats, which are those which are known or suspected, but not fully developed. An example is militarization of the space domain and the possible use of space for offensive and defensive military actions (Bidwell et al,11-12).

In this context, strategic stability cannot be achieved only by soft or hard balancing between great powers. Cooperation among them and between them and regional/middle powers is also essential to ensure 'broader' strategic stability. Such a cooperative balancing may use against a hegemon/great power, whose international irresponsibility or its destabilizing actions endangers strategic instability.

In this regard, theory of balancing is effective in explaining collective efforts. It is an effective way to optimize strategic advantages and open up more maneuvering space. A regional/middle or great power, whose interests are at stake in case of strategic instability tries to protect its interests and security through balancing via coalition/alliance-building. The aim is to avoid domination by destructive stronger power. It lies at the heart of traditional balance of power theory, according to which states join alliances to protect themselves from states or coalitions whose superior resources could pose a threat. Therefore, the goal of a coalition for balance is not only to survive or increase influence (Reginbogin et al,2020:39), but also to provide a 'broader' lasting strategic stability.

So, given the fact that the current state of strategic stability has become less manageable and more susceptible to all kinds of accidents and influences even from asymmetric factors, regional/middle power' role in providing a 'broader' strategic stability is unignorable. It's while in the past, great powers' influence on international affairs was so great that it was not easy for regional/middle powers to play a role in this issue. But it should be noted that when they enter a coalition or ally with a great power for cooperative balancing, it does not necessarily mean that they are to adopt a bandwagoning policy or on the other side, the great power seeks a buckpassing policy or wants to employ a proxy force.

Given the complexity of the international power equations, especially in transition period to a new world order and rapid shifts in the global balance of power, relational patterns between regional/middle and great powers are formed in different ways. Cooperation between them can be kind of a tactical coalition for positive balancing to achieve strategic stability, which benefit both of them. As mentioned, this article is to analyze the third

definition Iran-Russia cooperative balancing to provide 'broader' strategic stability.

4. Research Analysis and Findings

4-1. Restructuring the Middle East order

Over years, various factors at three levels caused constant tension and instability in the Middle East; Firstly, at domestic level some elements such as heterogeneous social, racial and religious structures, fragile and failed states, incomplete democracies and disproportionate distribution of power and wealth triggered many problems for countries. Secondly, at regional level some difficulties like dissatisfaction with regional balance of power, tense competition for regional supremacy and dispute over regional order made some troubles for regional security structure. Finally, the main factor at international level is great powers' intervention and interference in regional affairs. In recent years, combination of these factors, for example in the Syrian crisis, has intensified tensions and changed roles, relations and balance in the region. This situation is leading to shifts in political, economic and security orders in the Middle East. Early signs of such a development is visible in changes in components of regional order - power structure, agents, normative and relational patterns, as follow.

4-1-1. Power Structure

world politics is undergoing profound changes. American gradual decline, redistribution of power at international level and diversification of power centers are signs of this development, due to which, power arrangements and balance of power system in regions, including in the Middle East, cannot continue in previous US-centered form. Although the US has played a key role in defining geopolitical order in this region and directing it toward its own interests, it is facing more resistance and revisionist attempts than before. Middle East order is evolving to a more multiplex and multipolar one, in which new power structure, arrangements and consequently new balance system emerge. To analyze new situation, one should pay attention to transfer the region to a new order, in which the US and its allies will not be superior power, but part of the power equations. In this regard, important voices, calling for a reassessment of the extent of American involvement in the region and American allies in the Middle East itself seem to think that the US is already exiting the region (Gause,2019b:7).

4-1-2. Agents

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US became main agent of uni-multipolar order and gained a position of superiority in many regions, including in the Middle East. Over these years, it has had significant impact on major trends in the region. However, its position has been weakened in recent years. Strategic confusion, inability to advance goals, declining ability to manage trends, disagreements with allies and most importantly other/opponent agents' rising resistance to US unilateralism are signs of its weakening position. The consensus of the Brookings Institution's Middle East experts is that American influence in the region is certainly on the decline (Gause,2019b:12). Given this fact, Obama administration pursued a policy of retrenchment in the Middle East and this tendency has intensified under President Donald J. Trump (Furlan,2019:176). Europe, as an important US ally and another important agent, increasingly gets mired in its own internal problems and its role in the region has been significantly limited. Growing disagreements between Brussels and Washington over various issues, including on Iran deal, has further weakened Europe's role. More importantly, opponent actors, who have so far been passive or inactive in the face of US supremacy, are defining new roles for themselves. Russia, which has returned to the Middle East, stepping into the vacuum left by the US. It, during the Syrian crisis, has defined itself a major player/agent that has ability not only to balance the US, but also to redirect trends. Although China does not currently play a significant role and is not willing to deeply intervene in the region, as its interests expand throughout the Middle East, its involvement in future issues of the region will be inevitable. Another crucial development is that unlike in the past, when much of the region's affairs were shaped by great powers politics, now regional actors, including Iran, have gained a certain amount of influence and their role as an effective agent cannot easily be ignored. All those actors use a variety of tools to advance their goals. Accordingly, diversification of agents in the Middle East creates different trends that are not simply as in the past and are not under US control. In this situation, the Middle East has become a 'microcosm' of twenty-first century power games (Nizameddin,2018:265).

4-1-3. Normative Patterns

The "belief" in American supremacy and its unchallengeable ability to shape power equations has been dominant normative pattern in the Middle East. But in recent years, that mentality has been challenged and changed. In new

conditions, "belief and trust" in the US and its superior position to define ordering and regulatory mechanisms has been questioned by both its opponents like Iran and Russia and its (former) allies like Turkey and Egypt. On the other hand, "resistance" against the US, as a norm and "belief" in possibility of creating trends contrary to US demands have been reinforced by different agents like Iran, Russia and even Taliban. Also, a "belief" is becoming a norm that trends can be made without the US and other agents/balancers are able to define or at least participate in defining new political, economic and security arrangements. In the US/West a "belief" is growing that hegemonic management of the Middle East has been a failure and it is no longer applicable in the region. Changes in both the ability of peripheral actors to mobilize their own resources and in the global governance context of how the powerful deal with the less powerful are main reasons for the formation of new normative patterns in the region (Gause,2019a:586).

4-1-4. Relational Patterns

relational patterns in form of "friendship, convergence and integration" on the one hand, and "opposition, divergence and confrontation" on the other, have evolved in the Middle East on intraregional and transregional levels (relations). Over the past three decades, relational patterns have been West/US-centered and limited to opponents or proponents of the West/US. US proponents, which includes many countries in the region, emphasizing "friendship, convergence and integration" with the US have defined their interests and actions in line with US political, economic and security considerations. On the other hand, although US opponents have been in "animosity, divergence and confrontation" with the US and its allies, they practically have not been able to challenge US-defined patterns.

Following new developments, especially due to US' weakening position, relational patterns have also changed and became more diverse. The pattern of "friendship, convergence and integration" with the US has faded and "opposition, divergence and confrontation" with it has intensified. It means that Washington is no longer final definer and shaper of these patterns. Signs of this change are as follow: further emphasis by US opponents, like Iran and Russia, on competition and confrontation with the US and its allies; more disagreement between the US and its (former) allies, like Turkey and Egypt; growing desire among countries in the region like Iran, Turkey and even some Arabs to expand relations with Russia and China; Iraq and

Turkey's distance from the US and their convergence to Iran and Russia; divergence between US allies, including between Qatar and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

4-2. Change in Iran and Russia's Role in the Middle East

Under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, relying on high oil revenues and bandwagoning policy with the US, Iran was an influential actor in the Middle East. Close ties with the US has great impact on turning Iran's role into the so-called gendarme of the Persian Gulf. Following the Islamic Revolution, Iran's influence in the Middle East declined due to cutting off relations with the US, Iraq's imposed eight-year war on Iran, internal problems and especially, tense pressure and sanctions on it by the US, which is pursued by Trump under a policy labeled as "maximum pressure" in context of containment policy (Mossalanejad,2019:15). Russia, on the other hand, had considerable influence in the Middle East during the Soviet era, but lost much of its influence with the collapse of communist regime. Internal problems of the 1990s did not allow Russia to act a great role in Middle East affairs. Accordingly, Iran and Russia's behavior in the Middle East until mid-2010s was largely passive and reactive.

But in recent years, they have gradually shifted their role from passive to active and effective one. Acting with 'strategic opportunism', they have tried to exploit the opportunity of regional unrest following the Arab Spring, the Syrian crisis and US strategic confusion in the region. Actually, the declining role the US has helped usher in a more multipolar Middle East (Mossalanejad,2018:26). Military cooperation between the two countries in Syria is an important milestone in their role change. It helped them to redefine and improve their role and position in the Middle East as new actors who do not accept power equations, normative and relational patterns defined by the US, and on the other, seek to shape new ones, which would best serve their interests. The change is as follow;

4-2-1. Increasing Impact on Power Structure

Iran's grand strategy is to become region's leading power and tries to strengthen its position against the US and its allies. Russia, by returning to the Middle East, is to maximize its strategic options in great power politics, especially against the US. It is not easy to deny that Iran and Russia have been able to challenge the traditional US-centered power structure in the region and shape some geopolitical arrangements beyond US control. As

trends show, Iran-Russia tactical coalition in Syria has been effective in altering the balance of power in Syria to the detriment of the US and its allies. Their effect is also evident over power struggles in other countries from Iraq to Lebanon, Afghanistan, Yemen and Libya.

Although Tehran and Moscow's approach is not necessarily aggressive and they do not seek hard confrontation with the US, their revisionism inevitably runs counter to US hegemonic attitude. Given the fact that developments in the Middle East are closely linked to the international arena, Iran and Russia are well aware that by challenging US-centered power arrangements in this region, they can change power relations with Washington on other issues and regions. In this way, they can improve their bargaining power and achieve greater impact and influence on power structure not only in the Middle East, but also in Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus (as areas of common interest between Iran and Russia).

4-2-2. More Influential Agents

unstable conditions in the Middle East have provided an enabling opportunity for Iran and Russia to elevate their position to the level of effective actors. Challenging the US and its allies in Syria, they have introduced themselves as new agents, who are able to change the rules of the game and promote effective balancing in their favor. They have also demonstrated their ability to influence and redirect some regional trends in other countries of the region. This disputing power is a sign of improvement in their position as influential agents. Iran's tangible influence on political and geopolitical processes in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Afghanistan cannot be ignored. It is able to build credible deterrence and effective response against US and its allies, including Israel and Saudi Arabia more than ever before (Khan and Zhaoying,2020:250-251).

Tehran has withstood American economic sanctions, has survived American military pressure and American efforts to isolate it diplomatically, from "dual containment" in the Clinton Administration to the "axis of evil" in the George W. Bush Administration. Iran now exercising more power in Iraq than does the US. Its military and political support sustained the Assad against the wishes of Washington (Gause,2019a:582). Russia has also increased its influence in the Middle East especially in Syria and Libya. Strengthening their role as active agents, Tehran and Moscow set to gain new leverage to secure their long-term interests. For them, improvising their role in the Middle East is a prelude to a higher role in international arena.

They have been somewhat successful in bolstering the idea that the US is in gradual decline and it is time for it to abandon its strategy of deep engagement and search for a grand strategy befitting a declining great power (Wolf,2020:94).

4-2-3. Effective on Normative Patterns

effectively intervening in the Syrian crisis, Iran and Russia have played an important role in challenging the "belief and trust" in US supremacy in the region. They questioned the "understanding" that Washington has unwavering ability to define trends, regulatory mechanisms and control over Middle East affairs. In this way, Tehran and Moscow have incorporated the concept of "resistance" and revisionism into the Middle East politics as a norm. In this regard, advancing the "axis of resistance" in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, Iran has developed "resistance/Shi'ism" as a normative pattern throughout the region. Russia, for its part, has presented state-centric and benefit-oriented approach as a normative pattern instead of US interventionist and value-based imposing pattern. The Russian model has attracted attention not only from its regional partners, but also from some US allies. Although Iran and Russia's normative patterns have little impact and they are not yet able to boost their position as a norm-definer, their norms have their own supporters.

4-2-4. Influential on Relational Patterns

Iran and Russia have increased their influence on relational patterns in the Middle East by defining new types of relations and changing traditional US-dominated relationship patterns. Iran's improved ability in this field is evident, on the one hand, in its own behavior, for example in its "active deterrence strategy" toward the US, which was reflected in Iran's missile attack on US Ein Al-Assad air base in Iraq and shooting Down U.S. Drones and on the other, in new Iran-centric relations in the region around the "axis of resistance". It is an Iran-backed alliance of state and non-state actors across the Middle East, that is looking for its place in the region by countering US and Israeli interests. Although Russia did not have an effect on relational patterns in the Middle East, it seeks to increase its share in regional politics by redefining these patterns, especially through undermining US relations with countries in the region. Moscow's assistance to Iran to resist against the US, its relative success to distance Turkey from the US, Russia's close ties with Egypt's El-Sisi and its expanded war presence in Libya are examples of this effect. Iran and Russia's improved

influence on relational patterns in the Middle East has created new arrangements, coalitions and axes that are not favorable to the US.

4-3. The concept of stability in Iran and Russia's Middle East policy

Multilayered complexities and a large number of sources of instability including Syrian crisis, political unrest in Iraq, civil war in Libya and Yemen, political tensions in Lebanon, Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, Iran-US confrontation, regional power rivalry, Sunni-Shia tensions, Arab-Israeli disputes, transregional terrorism and foreign powers' interference has made the Middle East one of the main centers of instability in the world. Of all the armed conflicts to emerge around the world since 2000, over a third have been in this region. Since the 2011 Arab Spring, that number has grown to half. From 2012 onward, the Middle East began to eclipse sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia in terms of conflict-related deaths worldwide, a first for the region since the end of the Cold War. Half of the recorded terrorism events in the world have likewise occurred in the Middle East since 2011. Historically, third of all wars between states since 1970 have occurred in the Middle East while nearly forty per cent all internationalized civil wars have occurred there as well during the same period (Mundy,2019:540-541).

The big problem of the Middle East is high risk of spread instability and insecurity from one country to another and from the region to other regions. Such a dynamic situation is evident in the Syrian crisis, which affects the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, Europe and Central Eurasia regions. Thus, (strategic) stability is a critical issue in the Middle East. In this region, strategic stability has traditionally been associated with great power politics and its provision has been a result of balance or agreement between great powers. But reproduction and transmission of instability suggests that a "broader definition" is needed, the same as third definition mentioned above, which will be provided at both international and regional levels.

Strategic stability at international level, like traditional definition, is based on a balance or agreement between great powers. Russia is an important player at this level. On the one hand, it tries to achieve strategic stability through balancing with other major powers, especially the US and on the other, is ready to cooperate with Washington to reduce potential conflict and "manage" the Middle East (Trenin,2016:5). Therefore, for Russia, the US is not necessarily a strategic competitor/threat, but also a strategic partner to ensure strategic stability. Cooperation against WMD Proliferation and

handling regional crises in some cases like Iran's nuclear program, Arab-Israeli tensions and Syrian crisis are issues related to strategic stability in the Middle East, on which Moscow has repeatedly shown its willingness to come to an agreement with Washington.

As noted, disagreement between great powers and their international irresponsibility negatively affect strategic stability. In Iran's view, the US has irresponsibly acted and has increased strategic instability in the Middle East by withdrawing from Iran nuclear deal, sabotaging stability in Syria, strong unilateral support for Israel (in the deal of the century) and setting the stage for the formation and development of ISIS. So, the US not only is not a stabilizing actor, but also a cause of (strategic) instability. Tehran emphasizes that Washington has sacrificed stability and security in the Middle East for its own interests and its policies have been main sources of instability. Therefore, since US-centered order is inherently at odds with strategic stability in the Middle East, Iran opposes such a stability, which is defined by Washington.¹

Iran and Russia have common views on this issue. They believe that the US missteps in the form of democratization, militarization or intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria resulted in nothing more than an increase in terrorism, violence, instability, insecurity and it is a clear evidence of its destabilizing role in the region. Anatoly Viktorov, the ambassador of Russia to Israel believes that testing methods of “geopolitical engineering” and the imposition of alien values and models of development on nations in the Middle East have led to grave consequences for the region (Viktorov,2019:64). Even US security assistance programs and its military sales tracks with a heightened risk of interstate conflict and reduced stability in the region (Childs,2019:178).

With this in mind and unlike in the past, strategic stability cannot be achieved only within limited framework great powers politics. US/West decline, regionalization of international system and regional powers' increased ability to affect stabilization process are important factors in new approach to strategic stability in the Middle East. Iran and Russia relatively share this view. Although, cooperation with the US to achieve strategic

1. See Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei' comments at <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/5935/Iran-has-defeated-all-of-US-s-vicious-plans-for-the-region> and at <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/7785/We-will-definitely-strike-back-at-the-U-S-in-response-to-the> (Accessed June 21,2020).

stability is important for Russia, it also accept the need for collaboration with regional powers, emphasizing US strategic irresponsibility. Moscow's cooperation with Iran to stabilize Syria, maintain Iran deal, condemnation of the US assassination of the Iranian General, Qassem Soleimani¹ and emphasis the need to define a new security order in the Persian Gulf with the participation of regional powers² are signs of Russia's new approach to strategic stability in Middle East.

Moscow knows that the vacuum created by US decline and changes in Middle East balance of power will be accompanied by instability and tensions, and that regional powers, like Iran, have reliable capacities to stabilize the region.³ Accordingly, common views along with practical experience of cooperation are a good ground for sustainable interaction between the two countries on strategic stability. In this regard, Putin, while referring to Russia's interest in strengthening partnership with Tehran, emphasizes that such a cooperation is an important factor to maintain stability and security across a large territory from Central Asia and the Caspian region to the Middle East.⁴

4-4ccfan and Russia's Balance Strategy in the Middle East

Iran and Russia, with a realistic approach to international politics, consider the existence of balance of power as a major factor of strategic stability. Their assessment of the reasons behind instability in the region have at least one point in common: The West/US tries to establish its desired balance system, even with destructive measures such as "directed chaos".⁵ US policy not only did not lead to balance and stability, but also is main factor of imbalance and instability. Despite negative consequences, the US insists on maintaining this manipulated system, in which threats and instability are reproduced. The US National Security strategy (2017:49) states that "we

1. See more at <https://tass.com/politics/1105565> (Accessed July 16,2020)

2. See more on Russia's plan at <https://tass.com/world/1070933> (Accessed July 15,2020)

3. See Putin's comments on Iran at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61792> (Accessed July 15,2020)

4. See Putin's comments at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52650> (Accessed July 15,2020)

5. See Iran's military chief of staff General M. H. Bagheri's comment on that "instability is a pretext for the US presence in the region. If the region is calm, the US should leave" at <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/131949/US-behind-new-rise-of-terror-in-Afghanistan> (Accessed June 6,2020)

will retain the necessary American military presence in the region to preserve a favorable regional balance of power”.

Trump administration support this approach, trying to strengthen traditional alliances with Arab countries, encourage creation of an Arab NATO, reinforce military presence in the region, put pressure on resistance forces like Iran and intervene in regional affairs. At the same time, US policy on balance system in the Middle East has met with opposition specially from Iran and Russia, who try to upset the balance system and make rearrangements in the region. These two frontlines are not completely rigid and some countries such as Turkey and Egypt fluctuate between them. Inside these two spectrums, views are also not exactly the same. Among revisionist countries, Russia seeks both hard and soft balancing, but Iran emphasizes hard one against the US.

Until recent years, they acknowledged the West/US superiority in shaping balance of power system. It is reflected in their passive reactions to the Iraq war, the Arab Spring and NATO invasion of Libya. However, Washington's insistence on aggressive unilateralism brings them closer together for a better balance. By resisting in Syria, they have shown that seek new balance that will bring more sustainable stability and lasting benefits for them. Iran believes that the region is in a transition period to new order, the content of which is not defined by the West/US and other actors, like Iran, can be influential in forming this content.¹

Washington opposes Iran and Russia's growing role in the Middle East, hence the US National Security strategy (2017) blames Iran for perpetuating the cycle of violence in the region (page 49) and Russia for contesting US geopolitical advantages (page 26). Trying to rebalance the region, Russia seeks to prevent negative consequences of US missteps on its security and also to regain its great power position. The Middle East is a good place for Moscow to compete and oppose the US because of its remoteness from Russia's borders and CIS region. From this perspective, some analysts consider the Syrian crisis as an arena for Russia's proxy war with the US (Droz-Vincent,2020:128).

To balance the US in the Middle East Russia has taken the following steps: active military operation in Syria, opposition to Washington's policy to

1. See more in J. Zarif's book, *Transition in International Relations of Post-Western World*, Tehran: Center for International Research and Education, 2016.

pressure on anti-US forces like Iran, efforts to weaken US ties with Turkey, arms sales to Iran, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, etc., attempts to create tactical coalition in the region (with Iran, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, etc.), active diplomacy in regional issues such as Iran nuclear deal and Israeli-Palestinian conflict, trying to strengthen relations with US's Arab allies like Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt and efforts to expand political influence in the region through state/interest oriented discourse (Jones,2019:14). In this way and in the framework of the geopolitical competition, Russia is to establish a balanced system with the US in the Middle East (Pashapoor,2018:196).

As noted, given the shifts in international relations and strengthening regional powers' role in the Middle East, the issue of balance among them and between them and great powers has become more important than in the past. Over years, the US and its allies has enjoyed positive balance to the detriment of others. This situation put it in a weak position, raised threats and set restrictions for it. "Maximum pressure" is a strategy in this direction, that aims to change Iran's regime or behavior to bring it in line with the US's desired order. Tehran not only has not accepted it, but also is pursuing "maximum resistance strategy" against it. In this vein, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has called on Iranians to "make appropriate and proportionate arrangements against the enemy's military postures."¹ To do so, Iran has made considerable investment and progress in the development of its missile and drone capabilities.

Russia, like Iran, does not agree with US-defined order and balance system in the Middle East and believes that this system does not provide its long-term benefits. On the other hand, advancing interests in relations with diverse partners like Iran-Israel-Arabs-Syria-Turkey and between contradictory issues such as geopolitics and economics is not an easy task for Moscow. Its solution to this problem is multivectoralism and support for a broad regional balance system. Accordingly, Russia establishes a level of relations with "all parties", at international level with great powers like the US, and at regional level with different countries in the region. In this way, it increases possibility of achieving its goals, and enhances its bargaining power with the US. Stepanova believes that main driver of Russia's policy in the Middle East is acceptance of and adjustment to the reality of the

1. See more at <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-s-supreme-leader-warns-of-enemy-s-war-posture-/29914793.html> (Accessed July 23,2020)

regionalization of policy and security, and its attempt to balance between the main conflict parties in their respective contexts (Stepanova 2018: 16). Moscow uses such a "Russian balance" system in the Mediterranean region too (Irkhin and Moskalenko, 2020: 120).

Given the importance of such a balance model, Russia avoids siding with one side in a conflict or rivalry against the other. So, in developing relations with Iran, it has been cautious of being suspected of supporting the "Shiite Crescent" against the Sunni countries/coalition. Opposition to tenacious power struggle between regional powers (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel), deepening arms cooperation with Iran and Syria for military balance, attempts to reduce regional tensions between Iran and Israel in Syria, proposing new security order for the region and etc., are examples of Russia's policy to promote broader regional balance in the Middle East. Iran has no problem with this approach. Both countries are aware of the risk of turning local and national crises into regional and then international ones. So they consider broad regional balance as an important element of security system and strategic stability in the Middle East.

4-5. Iran-Russia's Cooperative Balancing for a 'Broader' Strategic Stability

Iran and Russia share a common interest in maintaining regional stability in a vast geography from Afghanistan to Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus and the Middle East. Over the last few years, they are worried about risks of increased instability in the Middle East and CIS. Despite common understanding, the two countries lacked a stable model for cooperation for stabilization. But the systemic threat in the Middle East and their perception of meaningful relationship between the Ukraine and Syria crises has led to closer interaction between Tehran and Moscow. It is noted that, in the aftermath of the Ukraine Crisis, one of Russia's main goals in its foreign policy has been to counterbalance the US (Azizi, 2019: 93).

They agree that lack of a "balanced" balance of power system greatly affects the occurrence of instability in the Middle East. They believe that US destabilizing interventionism and its efforts to create its own desired unbalanced order has been one of the main reasons for instability. Given that, they, while putting an end to policy of "strategic patience", have found the strategy of "direct resistance" a more effective way to restore balance and secure their interests. In this regard, Iran agrees with Moscow that there would be no repeat of the "Libyan scenario" in Syria (Parker, 2015: 10).

In this context, Moscow and Tehran decided to intervene in the Syrian crisis, reacting to systemic pressure on their interests and position in the Middle East. Although they are ready to compromise on a more balanced balance, the US's insistence on "maximum pressure" on Iran and containing Russia has been an obstacle to a great deal. Under this condition, the two countries have realized that in zero-sum geopolitical game with the US a comprehensive and cooperative deterrence is a more effective way to guarantee a positive balance.

Accordingly, Iran's emphasis on strengthening the "axis of resistance" in the Middle East is not necessarily ideological, but a geopolitical effort for balancing. This goal has led Iran to closer ties with Russia as a balancer. Russia, on the other hand, has found cooperation with Iran useful too. It considers Iran an important factor in the Middle Eastern and Central Eurasian geopolitical and security systems and an influential actor, that practically is to counter US interventionism. Some Russian analysts, pointing out that Iran is one of the main winners of the Iraq and Syria crises, stress on significance of Tehran's role on the Future of the Middle East and believe that cooperation with it is important for Russia (Труевцев,2017:158). Despite some differences, the two countries' pragmatic approach allows them to forge a tactical alliance. Their main commons are as follow;

- Common belief in destabilizing consequences of US unilateralism
- Advantages of the two countries' anti-US approach for each other
- Their synergic capacities to balance and stabilize the Middle East and central Eurasia
- Mutual geopolitical need to ensure security and stability in adjacent regions (Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus and Afghanistan)
- Mutual commitment to the principle of good of neighbourliness and maintaining regional stability.

Tehran and Moscow are aware of the inadequacy of their resources and the Syrian experience showed them that synergic cooperation is a more effective and less costly way to create more sustainable stability and positive balance. For them, such an interaction is necessary for the following reasons;

- Redefining current unbalanced order that reproduces instability
- Deterring US aggressive expansionism

- Preventing US regional allies' destabilizing actions and effects in the Middle East and Central Eurasia
 - Ensuring sustainable stability in adjacent regions through effective balance
- Iran and Russia irregularly have used each other's capabilities to achieve these goals, but growing sense of threat in the Syrian crisis brought them to more regular interaction. There are numerous military and security agreements between them for cooperation in a vast geographic expanse from the Caspian Sea to the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. In this regard, on July 2020 they agreed to conclude long-term strategic agreement, which covers political, defense, security and trade fields.¹ In this context, Iran and Russia conducted joint military drills in the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf. They also have similar plans to restructure Persian Gulf security system² and jointly (plus Turkey) promote the Astana process to stabilize Syria. Tehran also holds Regional Security Dialogue, among the participating countries (Russia, China, India, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), Russia has the most in common with Iran in theory and practice to develop a model for political and security regional cooperation without the US (Noori,2019).

It is undeniable that Russia without Iran and Iran without Russia could not have been able to advance the goal of stabilizing the Syria, and it is logical if they continue to interact in changing conditions of the region. Close cooperation is doubly important, especially because Washington insists on aggressive approach toward the two countries. Meanwhile, meaningful relationship between balance and stability and imbalance and instability in the Middle East and adjacent regions, encourages them to cooperate more closely. In this context, US Militarism in the Middle East, NATO enlargement and US/NATO missile defense system are threats to both countries. Cooperation for regional balancing gives them more leverage against these threats and ensures more sustainable balance and stability.

4-6. Benefits and Threats of Russia's Policy on Stability and Balance in the Middle East for Iran

The Middle East "unstructured order" and the region's dependence on regulatory mechanisms defined by foreign powers are two factors that have

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1. See more on this agreement at <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/161288/Tehran-Moscow-to-conclude-long-term-strategic-agreement> (Accessed July 29,2020).
 2. See more on Iran plan at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047472> (Accessed July 2, 2020).

paved the way for Russia's intervention in the region, including in the issues of stability and balance. Russia's policy on these issues has both positive and negative effects on Iran.

The positive aspect at the international level is related to its cooperation with great powers like the US. Opposition to proliferation of WMD, opposition to arms race in the region, managing tenacious regional power struggle, resolving regional crises and fighting international terrorism are main problems of the region, related to strategic stability. If Moscow and Washington's cooperation leads to solve these problems, Iran will also benefit. Despite some disagreements between Iran and Russia and the US on these issues, Tehran is not opposed to international cooperation on them. Basically, stability is strategically important for Iran, because it is located in unstable region and there are fragile edges between security and insecurity in surrounding regions and its borders.

Russia's policy of strategic stability at international level has also negative dimension for Iran. It will be to Tehran's detriment if this policy is a basis for a deal between Russia and the US on managing Middle East affairs, ignoring interests of the countries of the region. At this level, Russia prefers a oligarchic world order that includes Russia (Trenin,2017). That means a "limited concert of the great powers", which manages global and regional affairs, including the Middle East. In this sense, Russia can use Iran as a tool to bargain with other powers, especially the US. (Nizameddin,2018:267). Indeed, this approach is not in Iran's favor.

The positive dimension of Russia's policy on strategic stability at the regional level is related to its approach to achieve it through cooperation with regional powers, including Iran as in the Syrian case. This approach strengthens the region and Iran's security and stability and improve the two countries' bilateral relations. Such a cooperation, reduces the costs of providing stability and security and is effective in advancing Tehran's regional position. Mutual understanding and cooperation will ensure Iran and Russia's long-term interests in adjacent regions.

As negative aspect at regional level, we can refer to Russia's possible attempts to define limitations for Iran and curb Tehran's regional ambitions, assuming that these ambitions are detrimental to strategic stability in the region. Russia has pursued this approach by ignoring Israel's attacks on Iranian targets in Syria. One of the reasons has been to limit Iran's ambitions in Syria. Although Moscow also uses Iran to balance Israel to provide

strategic stability in the region, such an approach is not in Tehran's interests. On the other hand, Iran's strategy of establishing regional order in the Middle East with an intraregional approach is guided by two simple principles: participating of regional powers and rejecting foreign interference. Accordingly, although Iran and Russia can work together to undermine the US-built order, in Iran's intra-regional approach Russia is also considered as a foreign force and its further possible interventions in the region could be opposed by Iran.

Russia's policy on balance of power system in the Middle East also has a dual positive and negative impact on Iran. As a positive side at the international level, we can mention Moscow's efforts to balance the US. This policy serves Iran's interests. Tehran and Moscow theoretically and practically are in common in opposing to US destructive expansionism. This is the main reason of their military cooperation in Syria. Russia's political and military capabilities are attractive to Iran for an effective deterrence against the US and on the other, Iran's geopolitical and geoeconomic capabilities are useful to Russia for an effective balance against the US. Definitely, synergy of the two countries' resources and capabilities can reduce their costs and increase the effectiveness of deterring and balancing.

But Russia's policy at international level could have negative consequences for Iran, among which is Moscow's possible agreement with Washington on Middle East balance system, using Iranian card. Despite some disagreements, Moscow insists that Washington cannot be excluded from this system. Cooperation with the US in securing regional balance has multiple benefits for Russia. For example, it avoids the costs of hard balancing with the US, can be in a negotiating position with the US as a balancer, highlights the revival of Russia's great powerness and seizes the opportunity for participation in managing international politics. Such callous pragmatism seems to be the most effective way of justifying Russia's foreign policy, and selling it to the US in the hopes that the US has no choice but to deal with Russia as its equal (Kirasirova, 2018:266). An important disagreement between Iran and Russia is that although Iran sees the US as "part of the problem", which plays a destructive role in the issues of balance in the Middle East, Russia believes that Washington can be a "part of the solution".

Russia's policy on regional balance also has a dual effect on Iran. On the positive side, Moscow's belief in the need for a broad regional balance in the Middle East can reduce tensions and bring more stability and security to the

region. Russia does not agree with the US, which believes in its allies' superiority and security for them to the detriment of others. This approach serves Iran's interests too. Russia has taken practical steps for broad regional balance, for example, military sales to Iran, including S-300 systems and electronic warfare systems, opposition to extend the UN arms embargo on Iran (according to JCPOA)¹, political support of Iran's nuclear deal and different view on Iran's missile program² against US pressure. Practically, Iran has no problem with Russia's policy on broad regional balance in the Middle East and Russia, on the other, has no problem with strengthening of Iran's regional position to the extent that it does not upset the regional balance system.

Moscow's policy of balance at regional level has negative consequences for Iran too. Although Tehran is searching for a new place in the Middle East as a great regional power, others, including Russia have different interpretation of this strategy as an attempt to gain supremacy in the region. So, it does not support Iran's ambitions and uncontrollable strengthening of its position. According to Moscow, Tehran's efforts to reshape regional power arrangements to become the leading power in the region could lead to fierce power competition, unconstrained arms race and pave the way for further US intervention. Since these developments negatively affect Russia's interests in the region, it opposes improving Iran's regional power out of balance system. So, if Russia's policy means a managerial approach to the region, defining limitations for Iran, it is against Iran's interests.

On the other, Russia pursues a policy of multivectoralism, making relations with "all" Middle Eastern powers and tries to make itself a non-ignorable

1. Under a deal signed in 1989, Moscow agreed to deliver \$5.1 billion in weapons to Tehran, including S-200VE air defense systems, MiG-29 and Su-24 fighter jets as well as Mi-17 copters. In the 2000s, Iran imported even more Su-25 aircraft and purchased the Tor-M1 air defense systems. Moscow delivered the Russian S-300 missile defense system to Iran in 2016. Unconfirmed reports indicate that Iran is seeking to purchase Sukhoi fighters (35, 30SM and 27SM-3 models), MiG fighters, air defense systems, Bastion Coastal Defense Missile System and the T-90 tank from Russia. See more at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sunset-of-the-iran-arms-embargo-the-narrow-path-to-a-policy-compromise> (Accessed June 11,2020).

2. See more at: <https://www.presstv.com/Detail/2020/06/05/626785/Russia-defends-Iran%E2%80%99s-peaceful-space-program-against-US-opposition> (Accessed June 13,2020).

interlocutor for all the relevant parties (Perthes,2018:102). It avoids to go deep into tensions in the Middle East, including in securitized rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Santini,2017:103). So it does not want that close ties with Iran upset its relations with Saudi Arabia and Israel, or being accused of extensive supporting of Iran and Shiite crescent against the Sunni countries. In this sense, Russia does not agree with Iran's "resistance axis" and even opposes it. In addition, Moscow considers US allies, including Israel and Saudi Arabia, to be "part of the solution" to the problems of the Middle East, but Iran thinks of them as "part of the problem". Both sides are cautious in developing ties. Iran has no intention of serving as a bargaining chip for Russia in its rivalry with the US. Similarly, Moscow is by no means interested in unnecessarily entering a battlefield in which Iran is facing off the US.

Lack of clear strategy and inadequacy of tools and resources are other important limitations to Iran-Russia's cooperation. But pointing out the negative sides of Russia's policy on stability and balance in the Middle East for Iran does not mean that Tehran rules out the benefits of cooperation. Iran acknowledges that this cooperation does not have enough capacity to make a fundamental change in the regional order and balance system, but believes that it can be effective in mitigating the instability and alter imbalances. So, cooperation not only is useful, but also necessary, because in US-centered balance system threats and instability are reproduced and their negative consequences will affect Iran and Russia.

5. Conclusion

In recent years, the Middle East has undergone geopolitical shifts, changes in power arrangement and is in transition to a new order. These events have had different impact on regional issues like strategic stability and balance. US decline and turmoil in the region have intensified complexity. It has been an opportunity for Iran and Russia to change their role from marginal to an active and inclusive one. Especially joint action in Syria has allowed them to present themselves as influential agents, who are effective on strategic stability in the region through balancing the US at international level and supporting a broad regional balance system. Despite differences, they have preferred to cooperate and their cooperative balancing has been effective to provide 'broader' strategic stability in the region.

At the same time, Russia's policy has a dual effect on Iran. At international level, Russia's efforts to balance the US could be effective in stabilizing the

region and serves Iran's interests. But it is to Iran's detriment and cannot lead to stability, if Moscow's goal is to reach an agreement with Washington to manage the region under "Great Powers Politics". Russia's policy on broad regional balance of power system is in line with Iran's interests, if it leads to a realistic balance between Middle Eastern powers and ensure security and stability. But if it is just a foreign interference to manage region's affairs, determining the scope of the game for Iran, it would be against Iran's interests and would not lead to strategic stability. Iran has sought to push Russia into the positive dimensions of its policy on balance and stability. On the other, Moscow has shown that it relatively recognizes Iran's interests and considers cooperation with Iran as a helpful way to ensure strategic stability and balance.

Moscow's approach to cooperation with Iran is realistic, pragmatic and utilitarian. From this perspective, Iran is important to Russia to the extent that it can serve Russia's interests. Considering this fact, Iran has sought to regulate its policy toward Russia on such a realistic and utilitarian basis. It interacts with Russia in areas of its interests, trying to take advantage of Moscow's presence and influence in the Middle East, including in the issues of balance and stability. Accordingly, Iran (as well as Russia) is aware of limits of cooperation. So, they, along with working together, with a multivectoral approach, seek to interact with different partners and use a variety of tools to ensure strategic stability and balance. Due to limitations, in different sections of this article, it is emphasized that results of cooperation are relative and limited. Given this fact, Iran and Russia cannot easily extend their cooperation in Syria to other countries and regions, for example in the Persian Gulf or the Caucasus. It requires more consolidation of resources, more trust and a clear strategy.

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