**Экономика и политика стран Азии и Африки в XX и XXI вВ.**

|  |
| --- |
|  |

DOI: 10.31696/2618-7302-2020-4-247-256

**IRAN’S POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST:**

**POLITICAL AND MILITARY DIMENSIONS**

© 2020 **Vladimir M. Akhmedov**[[1]](#footnote-2)

The article explores the core components of Iran’s politics in the Middle East and its latest developments achieved in the region since the 1990s. The author focuses on the Iranian activity in some Arab countries, mainly in Syria, showing why and how Iranian influence managed to ground so deeply in the social fabric of the Syrian society. The author briefly characterizes historic background of Arab-Iranian relations, showing the place and role of Iranian politics in Arab society and political institutions on the eve of ‘Arab Spring’. The article studies the influence of ‘Arab Spring’ on Arab-Iranian relations and shows the challenges, caused by this popular uprising on its early stages in some Arab countries, for Iran and its relations with Middle Eastern states. The stand of the Arab authorities with regards of the given situation and its ability to influence its development are demonstrated as well. The author explores the latest actions of IRI to create structures under Iranian control in some Arab countries, showing the latest developments of Iranian penetration into Arab countries, first of all into Syria. The author analyzes the actions of Iranian diplomacy in concerning the above mentioned goals to strengthen Iranian positions in the Middle East. The article shows the main spheres of Iranian, Israeli, Turkish and Russian contradictions in some Arab countries, first of all in Syria, paying special attention to the development of Russian-Iranian relations in the Middle East. The author estimates Iran’s chances to safeguard its present position in the Middle East in the contexts of latest developments in the region and with regards to Iran’s relations with Russia and Turkey. The author tries to predict transformations in Iran’s Middle Eastern politics in view of further political developments in the region, sharing his views about reconsidering Russian-Iranian relations aiming to improve it, considering the upcoming challenges in the region, where Moscow pursues today an active policy.

*Keywords:* Russia, Iran, Turkey, USA, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Israel, Middle East, international relations.

*For citation:* Akhmedov V. M. Iran’s Politics in the Middle East: Political and Military Dimensions. *Vestnik Instituta vostokovedenija RAN.* 2020. 4. Pp. 247–256. DOI: 10.31696/2618-7302-2020-4-247-256

**ПОЛИТИКА ИРАНА НА БЛИЖНЕМ ВОСТОКЕ:**

**ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ И ВОЕННЫЕ ИЗМЕРЕНИЯ**

**В. М. Ахмедов**

В представленной работе рассматриваются актуальные вопросы развития политики Ирана на Арабском Востоке за последние несколько десятилетий. Автор показывает, как формировалась и эволюционировала политика Ирана в ближневосточном регионе под влиянием происходивших в нем военно-политических трансформаций. Особое внимание уделяется политике Ирана в странах Арабского Востока, особенно Сирии. Автор показывает причины и обстоятельства, позволившие Ирану столь глубоко закрепиться в социальной ткани сирийского общества. Дается краткая характеристика истории развития отношений Ирана с рядом арабских стран Ближнего Востока. Показано место и роль Ирана в арабском обществе и арабских политических структурах накануне событий «Арабской весны». Автор исследует вопросы, связанные с влиянием народных движений в ряде арабских стран на политику Ирана в регионе и характер взаимоотношений ИРИ с рядом Ближневосточных государств. Дана позиция арабского руководства в сложившейся ситуации и его возможности влиять на ее развитие. Анализируются последние шаги Ирана по созданию подконтрольных структур в ряде арабских государств, прежде всего в Сирии. Дан анализ усилий иранской внешней политики в достижении поставленных задач, описаны основные шаги и мероприятия иранской дипломатии по укреплению своих позиций на Арабском Востоке. Автор исследует вопросы противостояния Ирана и Израиля, а также отмечает противоречия с Турцией и Россией, в некоторых арабских странах, прежде всего, в Сирии. Особое внимание уделено российско-иранским отношениям на Ближнем Востоке. В статье оцениваются шансы Ирана удержать прежние позиции в регионе в контексте выстраивания взаимоотношений с Россией и Турцией. Автор показывает, что такие основополагающие принципы внешней политики ИРИ, провозглашенные в начале Исламской революции, как «ни Запад, ни Восток, а ислам», экспорт Исламской революции, приоритетные отношения со странами мусульманского мира претерпели определенные изменения под воздействием сложных региональных процессов. Автор считает, что внешняя политика Ирана в 1990-е гг. менялась и становилась более гибкой и умеренной, постепенно утрачивая характерный для 1980-х гг. радикальный характер. Главный упор во внешней политике был сделан на обеспечение внутренней безопасности страны, ее территориальной целостности, поддержании добрососедских отношений с пограничными ИРИ государствами. Однако события «Арабской весны» и непростые внутриполитические трансформации в иранском социуме вынудили Иран постепенно вернуться к жесткой политике в регионе. Автор стремится спрогнозировать изменения в характере политики Ирана на Ближнем Востоке и делится соображениями относительно возможных изменений в характере российско-иранских двусторонних отношений перед лицом грядущих перемен в регионе, где Москва сегодня ведет активную политику.

*Ключевые слова:* Россия, Иран, Турция, США, Египет, Саудовская Аравия, Ирак, Сирия, Израиль, Ближний Восток, международные отношения.

*Для цитирования:* Ахмедов В. М. Политика Ирана на Ближнем Востоке: политические и военные измерения. *Вестник Института востоковедения РАН.* 2020. № 4. С. 247–256. DOI: 10.31696/2618-7302-2020-4-247-256

Since the American invasion in Iraq in 2003 and in the next decades international community have considered Iran’s geostrategic importance through the prism of not only its nuclear program, but of Iranian regional policy as the most important element of Tehran’s foreign policy, as well. Middle East is of crucial importance to Iran. That’s why IRI’s status and prestige are derived mainly from Iran’s activities in and vis-à-vis the Middle East. Iran’s hostile attitude towards Israel, its rejection of Americans attempts on hegemony in the Middle East, its opposition to USA activity in the region constitutes the greatest threat to regional security in the eyes of international community, first of all in the West. The very fact that an important part of the Iranian elite in the Middle East plays there major part — due to ideological and biographical reasons — only proved this attitude to Iranian politics in the Middle East true.

The changes ushered in by the “Arab Spring” in the Middle East initially had no repercussions for Iran’s strategic position. Iran greeted Egypt’s return to its role as a moderate Islamic power. The real test for Iran is Syria. The rebellion against the Assad regime and the decision of the Palestinian Hamas to opt out of the so-called “axis of resistance”, dealt severe ideological blows to Tehran. The long and painful weakening of the Bashar Assad regime (constructed by his father. — *V*. *A.*) had already produced a strategic stalemate between regional and global actors. In the long term Syrian crisis has the potential to escalate into a regional or super-regional war waged on the basis of ethnicity and confession. This would be neither in the interests of Russia, Turkey, and Arabs, nor of Iran. As in the case of Afghanistan, it is likely to prove impossible to resolve the Syrian crisis without Iran’s involvement. In view of the new situation in the Middle East, therefore, a review of Iranian relations with Middle Eastern countries and powerful international players in this region would seem quite advisable, making a resolution of the nuclear issue all the more urgent.

The above mentioned developments force us to turn again to the topic of Iran’s foreign policy in the region and the possibility of its evolution. In this regard, a brief retrospective analysis of the main directions of Iran’s foreign policy in the Middle East and its evolution may give some idea of Iran’s policy in the region in the foreseeable future.

After the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, the main directions of Iran's foreign policy were determined, first of all, by the specific character of state power build on the basis of Shiite clergy, which took root in the country. Traditional Islamic values served as the main ideological justification for Iran’s foreign policy. The external factor played a significant and sometimes decisive role in Iran’s policy. In the most acute political moments, Shiite clergy were brought to the forefront, and the Islamic leadership tried to get out of the internal political crisis with their help.

The fundamental principles of Iran’s foreign policy, proclaimed at the beginning of the Islamic revolution, such as “neither the West, nor the East, but Islam”, the export of the Islamic revolution, prioritized relations with the countries of the Muslim world underwent certain changes. Iran’s foreign policy in the 1990s changed and became more flexible and moderate, having lost the characteristic of the 1980s radical character. The main emphasis in foreign policy was placed on ensuring the country’s internal security, its territorial integrity, maintaining good-neighborly relations with the Iranian Border States (see [Arab-Iranian Relations, 1988, p. 3–18, 73–103]). In 1997 a newly elected Iranian president M. Khatami proposed new foreign policy concept that of a dialogue between cultures and civilizations of the Western and Eastern worlds based on the principles of mutual understanding and trust. Iran’s foreign policy was built according to these guidelines; Iran intensified its relations with both Western and Eastern countries. Iran emerged from the international political isolation in which it was in the first years after the Islamic revolution. Relations with the EU countries were improving. This was of particular importance for Iran, whose economy needed foreign investment and technology. The most active cooperation with the EU was in the oil and gas industry. Business circles of European countries expressed their readiness to invest in Iranian infrastructure, construction and tourism.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Certain success was achieved by Iran in normalizing relations with Arab countries, primarily the Arabian monarchies of the Persian Gulf. Iran put forward the idea of ensuring regional security exclusively by the forces of the coastal states with the obligatory participation of Iran. An important step towards the implementation of a unified regional security system was the signing in April, 2001 of the Security Pact between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In an effort to counteract the US plans to isolate Iran in the Middle East, Iranian Middle East diplomacy was actively working on the topic of the possible participation of Iran (as an associate member) together with Turkey in the work of the Arab League. In the implementation of its policy to normalize relations with Arab countries, Iran relied on Syria, which was one of the main Arab allies of Iran [Hunter, 2010, p. 51–70]. The war in Iraq and its aftermath unpredictably changed the configuration of political forces in the region and made Iran fear for its security. In this regard, Iran’s foreign policy priorities began to change.

After the “conservatives” returned to power in Iran in 2005, Iran, together with its Arab allies in the region, primarily Syria, pursued an active policy to strengthen its influence in the Middle East. This political line of Iran was reflected in Iraq, where a government controlled by Tehran was formed during the war in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, during the events in Beirut in the spring of 2008, when Hezbollah actually took power into its own hands, during the war in Gaza in winter 2009. Using the mistakes of Arab leaders and inter-Arab disagreements, and the presence of a Shiite minority there as a pretext for intervention, Iran has achieved certain results in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. The attempts, made by the American administration over the past three decades to change the system of power in Iran and restrain the growth of Iranian influence in the Middle East, did not bring the desired results [Гусейнов, 2007, p. 149–150].

Iran’s activities in the Middle East were determined by a number of important factors that had a significant impact on its policy. This is Iran’s support for Lebanese Hezbollah, which it used to strengthen its influence in Lebanon, as well as a tool to contain Israel’s aspirations. Iran was involved in the inter-Palestinian and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. It provided international support and assistance to Palestinian Hamas [Ehteshami, Ninnebush, 1997, p. 27–57]. Development of the revolutionary process in the Arab world, which began in 2011, significantly changed the existing balance of power in the Middle East. Popular demonstrations in Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain had a direct impact on the course of events throughout the Middle East. They touched upon the most acute problems associated with the creation of Palestinian state, security of Israel, and oil supplies from the Persian Gulf. At the same time, these processes were directly related to the role of Iran in the region.

In general, the events in the Arab world were positively viewed in Iran. The emerging situation in the region, according to the Iranian leaders, contributed to the implementation of Iran’s far-reaching domestic and foreign policy plans. In particular, the world community, distracted by the Arab events, did not follow so strictly the implementation of the Iranian nuclear program: The risk of Israeli military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities was significantly reduced. Using the situation, Iran sought to strengthen its position in the region, which had been among the most important directions of Iranian foreign policy over the past years. The resumption of relations between Cairo and Tehran can be attributed to certain success of Iran. The normalization of Iranian-Egyptian relations meant not only the departure of Cairo from the camp of “moderate” Arab countries, created by the United States against Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, but also the fact that Iranian foreign policy in Arab countries received additional recognition and legitimization. This created a serious gap in the policy of anti-Iranian mobilization of the Arab countries, which was carried out by the monarchies of the Persian Gulf, often using confessional contradictions between Sunnis and Shiites, which in practice led to the split of the region into two camps — Sunni and Shiite.

The process of ongoing changes in the Arab countries could not be considered in isolation apart of the results of the continuing confrontation between Iran and the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf, on the one hand, and between Iran and the international community, on the other. As a result of the events in Bahrain and the intervention of the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) armed forces, relations between Riyadh and Tehran have seriously deteriorated. Iran clearly underestimated the fact that the Arabs consider Bahrain exclusively their own one of influence. Arab monarchies feared that Iran could take advantage of their potential weakness as a result of the development of Arab revolutionary movement and use it to strengthen its position in the region.

The events that took place in the states of the Arab Mashriq (The East. — *V*. *A.*) were closely related to the situation in the Gulf. The warring parties in the Levant and the Persian Gulf carefully watched for any signs of a change in the situation in order to reconsider their positions in time and react to it (see: [Кулагина, Ахмедов, 2012, с. 500–508]). Events in Syria put Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas in a difficult position. The unrest in Syria showed the full extent of the severity of the division of the former alliances in the region. Although the West condemned Damascus for the excessive use of force against protestors, it — along with the GCC countries — until recently, generally viewed the Assad regime as part of the upcoming changes and reforms in Syria.

Iran needed Syria for a number of reasons. Due to the efforts of the regime of B. Assad, Tehran managed to thwart the emergence of united front of the USA and its Arab allies in the region against Iran. Damascus served as a conduit for Iranian policy in Lebanon. Iran has always viewed Damascus as an important link in the “axis of resistance” along the Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut-Gaza line, in order to exert deterrent influence on Israel, on the one hand, and to spread its influence in the region, including the support of Shiite communities in several Arab countries of the region, on the other.

It is worth mentioning that Syrian-Iranian alliance was shaped due to the varying degrees of the experiences and different geography of the two states. As to their political elite’s ideological and world views, it was them that played an important role in building this alliance. Syrian and Iranian leaders share some perceptions; their ideologies in certain aspects overlap. Iran tried to spread revolutionary Islam to create Muslim unity in the region by surmounting Arab–Iranian political division. Tehran demonstrates its solidarity by actively participating in the Arab–Israeli struggle. Meanwhile, Syria, as the heartland of Arabism, has striven to overcome the political fragmentation of the Arab world by acting as a trigger for Arab unity. Hafez Assad and Ruhollah Khomeini regarded their alliance as a vital tool to increase regional autonomy by diminishing foreign penetration into the Middle East.

Iran’s influence on Syria increased especially after Bashar al-Assad had come to power in Damascus in June, 2000, and the large-scale reforms he had carried out in the Syrian security structures at the turn of 2004–2005. Iranian penetration into Syria peaked in 2007–2009. It was during this period that Iran signed a whole series of profitable economic contracts with the new Syrian leadership and an agreement on military cooperation. This allowed Iran to penetrate almost all the institutions of the Syrian state and start to play an increasing role in Syrian society, exerting a beneficial influence on the mentality and views of the ruling Syrian elite. However, as events developed in the Syrian Arab Republic, Tehran could no longer count on the previous support of Damascus to protect its interests in Lebanon. In addition, taking into account the Syrian events, many Lebanese political forces could change their attitude towards Iran; reconsider the previous nature of their ties with Tehran. Iran also feared that regime change in Syria could undermine Iranian interests in the region [Ахмедов, 2010, с. 152–173]. Iran played a leading role in maintaining the current regime in the SAR. Since January, 2012, the Iranian Central Bank opened a multi-billion dollar line of credit to the Syrian authorities, which allowed them to regularly pay salaries to the personnel of the Syrian armed forces fighting against the armed opposition. At the same time, Iran sent several thousand Lebanese Hezbollah soldiers, advisers and specialists from the elite al-Qods corps, as well as Shiite militias from Iraq and Afghanistan, to the SAR to assist the army of Bashar al-Assad. As the Syrian armed uprising expanded, turned into a civil war, and Syrian armed conflict became internationalized, which resulted in the participation of a growing number of regional and international players, Iran saw this as a threat to its interests and increased its military presence in Syria trough Al-Qods officers and Shiite militias, mainly Lebanese Hezbollah.

In fact, many of Iranian actions in the foreign policy arena, including in Syria, were dictated by considerations of an internal order, the priority of which was the desire by any means to achieve the nuclear power status, like Israel and Pakistan. From this point of view, Iran could view Syria as a “trump card” in a larger geopolitical game, but at the same time, not forgetting about preserving its interests in this Arab country, which Tehran considered an important springboard in spreading its influence in the region (See [Ахмедов, 2018, с. 134–153]).

Participation of the Russian Aerospace Forces (RAF) in the Syrian armed conflict changed the situation in and around Syria fundamentally. Moscow has become a key participant in the Syrian conflict, and Tehran is forced to take its position in consideration. Despite the traditionally allied relations between Moscow and Tehran, Iran, not without reason, feared that a massive Russian military presence in Syria and Moscow’s growing political influence in new formats of international relations could force Iran to seriously adjust its plans in the region and, above all, in Syria. Outwardly, Iran sought to demonstrate in every possible way its support for Moscow’s plans. However, in practice Iran was categorically against the involvement of Saudi Arabia and the United States in the negotiations on Syria, and its loyal ally in the region — Lebanese Hezbollah, in principle, rejected even raising the question of withdrawing Shiite militias from Syria. Tehran understood that Syria is only one of the aspects (albeit not insignificant) of Russian-Iranian relations, and Russia is several times superior to Iran in military terms (including its presence in Syria). Therefore, Tehran, not daring to openly confront Moscow in Syria, sought to reduce the role of Ankara as one of the leading partners of Russia in the Syrian settlement and replace it with Iran, in order to thus exert a beneficial influence on the outcome of the peace talks on Syria. At the same time, Tehran was forced to reckon with the new realities that arose in the United States after President Trump had come to power. Iran was concerned with the unilateral US withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal and was closely following the reaction of the EU and Russia.

Do not forget that Iranian foreign policy is distinguished by enviable pragmatism and cold prudence. This was clearly seen in the example of Tehran’s interaction with various political forces in post-Saddam Iraq. Another indicator of the flexibility of Iranian policy could be demonstrated by the evolution of Iranian paradigm of exporting Islamic revolution. This paradigm was one of the main instruments of Iran’s foreign policy in the Arab East in the 1980s; it was even enshrined in the Iranian constitution. Faced with rejection in a number of Arab countries, primarily in Lebanon, Syria, and the monarchies of the Persian Gulf, the export policy of Islamic revolution underwent major transformations over the past decades. Having met resistance in the multi-confessional and multi-ethnic societies of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, with strong centralized power system (in Syria and Iraq), and the the Gulf monarchies’ hostile attitude to revolutionary Iran, whose (GCC states. — *V. A*.) security was provided by the United States, Iran abandoned direct and forceful methods of implementing the Islamic revolution export policy.

Instead, Iran focused on working with Shiite communities in Arab countries to expand and strengthen their positions in Arab countries. In this regard, Iran focused on the social, economic and humanitarian aspects of politics in Arab countries in order to facilitate and accelerate the process of socialization of Shiite communities, to increase their influence in the Arab society, and create positions in the political systems of these states. And it successfully fulfilled the task: Lebanon and Iraq are vivid examples; the representatives of Shiite parties and political organizations are included in the parliaments and governments of these countries. In a number of Persian Gulf monarchies (Qatar, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates) Iran created a whole network of the representatives of Shiite communities of its open and secret supporters, and a number of security issues and a positive trade balance of these countries, became largely dependent on the nature of their relationship with Iran (see: [Arab-Iranian Relations, 1988, p. 423–475; 477–500]). However, in the wake of events in the Arab world in 2010–2011 and especially in the context of the crisis aggravation in Syria and the hostilities in Yemen, the component of “direct force” in Iranian foreign policy began to prevail again. This gave an impetus to the revival of the idea of exporting Islamic revolution, but already in an ideologically and politically transformed form as a means of strengthening the Iranian military-political positions in Arab countries and attempts to impose their own political model of state structure and social life on them. And again, Iran’s successes in a number of Arab countries were undeniable. This allowed a number of senior Iranian leaders to repeatedly declare that Iran fully “owns” Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. However, today, as a result of strong pressure from the United States, other world powers and influential regional countries, Iran is forced to start revising its power policy. Iran began to show more political flexibility and readiness to compromise in order to avoid unwanted complications in relations with its allies, primarily Russia and Turkey, and an increase in the direct military threat from Israel and Saudi Arabia, in the interests of protecting and maintaining achieved positions. On the other hand, the aforementioned Arab countries, as a result of prolonged destabilization and military crises, found themselves on the brink of economic and humanitarian catastrophe, faced with a real threat of their transformation into a “failed state”. And the deep involvement of Iran in them poses a threat to the image and material components of the Iranian model and Iran’s ability to implement it in other countries of the region.

Indeed, many of Iran’s calculations in its regional policy are based on the the power factor, including the nuclear program, on its influence in the Shiite communities. So, one of the future footholds for Iranian advance in the region is Syria and Iraq, or rather the division of spheres of influence in these countries after the final withdrawal of foreign troops. And in this regard, Iran would rather prefer not to aggravate relations with the United States and Turkey because of the Assad regime, which can significantly limit the sphere of its interests in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, in recent years Iran has invested heavily in Iraq and Syria both financially and politically. By propelling the Shiites of Iraq and Syria to power, Iran was able to strengthen its political and military presence in the Levant. Since the withdrawal of some American troops from Iraq in 2019, Iran’s position has been further strengthened in this region. As for the murder of Qasem Soleimani (former commander of the elite Al-Qouds Corps. — *V. A*.); predicted weakening of Iranian position in the region. Exacerbation of the situation in northern Syria, during which the United States are clearly seeking to confront Russia and Turkey, on the one hand, and to strengthen their policy of containing Iran in the Middle East, on the other.

In our opinion, Russia is hardly worth embedding into the constructs of the US Middle Eastern politics, especially with an obvious force component. Especially, because, in practice, US schemes could turn into a policy of double containment of both Iran and Russia in the region. Moreover, as the recent clashes in western and southern Syria have shown, Iran is not going to reduce its military presence in Syria, but is striving to maintain and expand its position in Syria. In view of this the US and European pressure on Iran will be sufficient to engineer a breakthrough in efforts to avert escalating tension and a return to the negotiating table. Moreover, it could put Iran’s actions on the agenda of the United Nations Security Council and lead to a re-imposition of international sanctions.

It is worth mentioning that since the signature of the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) in July 2015, pragmatic elements in Iran’s leadership have shown that Iran was able to compartmentalize specific issues in its engagement with the West. A key issue is Iranian engagement in global politics by recognizing its role in specific areas. And it is quite possible that discussions on the Middle East and Syria, especially might allow some sort of approach. Using Iran’s economic interests, EC could exploit it as leverage to project desired influence over the Assad regime and groups in specific parts of the battlefield. Notwithstanding the specificity of decision-making mechanism in Iran such trade-off is quite possible while the decision-making is supervised by the Supreme Leader and coordinated, notably through the Supreme National Security Council.

It is worth mention that the danger of religious conflicts’ blowing up is equally high for Russia, West and Iran; neither, however, possesses capability beyond placatory declarations to prevent this from happening. In this regards the West will likely work on strengthening Egypt’s leadership role. Indeed, only Egypt as leading Arab power would be in position to counter the defamation of Arab Shiites by emphasizing their Arab-Muslim identity.

On the other hand, it can be assumed that in the foreseeable future, Egypt, KSA, Turkey and Iran can actively influence the issues of war and peace in Syria. At least all those countries are clearly seeking to increase their role in the Syrian crisis. Given the special nature of Russia’s relations with them, the framework of which is much wider than the Syrian issue; it is more profitable for Moscow to adhere to a consistent course of cooperation with these states on resolving the crisis in the SAR.

As to the Syrian-Iranian alliance it hasn’t always been successful in pushing regional politics in a desirable direction. On the other hand, the potential of Syrian-Iranian relations still capable to thwart the ambitions of other actors like Iraq, Israel and the USA. In this respect, the achievements of the Syrian-Iranian rapprochements over the past decades have been quite remarkable. The Syrian-Iranian alliance lasted for many years; much longer that one could imagine. And with no doubt this partnership will leave its stamp on modern Middle Eastern politics.

As for Iran itself, given the dramatic regional developments the relationship with the state needs to be reconsidered. Russian special services should try to expand contacts with the Iranian think tank scene. If successful, this could facilitate a more sophisticated exchange of views and minimize the risk of false signals and misunderstandings. Direct Russian-Iranian contacts are of great importance: Russia, unlike especially USA, doesn’t need seeking mediation in organizing such meetings.

As for Syria, Moscow appears to have an upper hand in Syrian affairs and much more influence in Damascus than Tehran does. In view of this fact Moscow could appear more capable of forcing change in the regime and in Syria’s political system as a whole. Russia could play an important mediator role in the transitional process as a reliable partner of Western countries’ concerns on their commitment as part of the settlement. Meanwhile, Moscow is likely to make any compromises that are less favorable to Iran. But in this way may be opened some solutions with appeal to Saudi Arabia and its Gulf partners. As for Assad, Russia and Iran seem ready to consider any alternatives, but it is quiet clear that putting in place a new leader alone might be insufficient to address Syria’s deep-rooted political problems. On the other hand, any short-term transition would come as a gift for anti-Assad actors (Saudi Arabia and Turkey), in accepting other compromises and saving their faces.

Even if some hopes for optimism concerning Iran’s role in the region and Syrian settlement still exist, one has to remember that no matter how difficult the transformation process in Syria would be the future of Iran and the region in general depends also on whether there can be reached an agreement on the nuclear issue. As for Iran, this is a question not only of politics but much more as an ideology and vital concerns.

References / Литература

Ахмедов В. М. *Современная Сирия. История. Политика. Экономика*. М., 2010 [Akhmedov V. M. *Modern Syria. History. Politics. Economy.* Moscow, 2010 (in Russian)].

Ахмедов В. М. *Сирийское восстание. История. Политика. Идеология*. М., 2018 [Akhmedov V. M. *Syrian Uprising. History. Politics. Ideology.* Moscow, 2018 (in Russian)].

Гусейнов В., Денисов А., Савкин Н., Демиденко С. *Большой Ближний Восток*. М., 2007 [Guseinov V., Denisov A., Savkin N., Demidenko S. *Big Middle East.* Moscow, 2007 (in Russian)].

Кулагина Л. М., Ахмедов В. М. *Иран.* *Ближний Восток, Арабское пробуждение и Россия: что дальше?* М., 2012 [Kulagina L. M., Akhmedov V. M. *Iran. The Middle East, Arab Awakening, and Russia: What’s Next?* Moscow, 2012 (in Russian)].

*Arab-Iranian Relations*. Khair el-Din Haseeb (ed.). Beirut, 1988.

Ehteshami A., Ninnebush R. A. *Syria and Iran. Middle Powers in Penetrated Regional System*. L., New York, 1997.

Hunter Sh. T. *Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Resisting the New International Order.* Santa Barbara, 2010.

Electronic sources / Электронные ресурсы

Akhmedov V. Syrian crisis. *Special Report*. Berlin. 10.04.2019. URL: https://doc-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/DOC-expert-speaks-at-a-roundtable-on-Syria.pdf (accessed 08.10.2020).

Clawson P. Iran’s Vulnerabilities to U.S. Sanctions (Part 1): Finding the Weak Spots. URL: http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-vulnerabilities-to-u.s.-sanctions-part-1-finding-the-weak-spots (accessed 08.10.2020).

Lake A. Confronting Backlash States. *Foreign Affairs*. 1994. 73. No.2. URL: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/1994-03-01/confronting-backlash-states (accessed 10.10.2020).

Mansharof Y. Despite denials by Iranian regime, statements by Majlis member and reports in Iran indicate involvement of Iranian troops in Syria fighting. *The Middle East Media Research Institute*. 4.12.2013. URL: http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/108/0/7623.htm (accessed 10.10.2020).

1. Vladimir M. AKHMEDOV, PhD (History), Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Oriental Studies RAS, Moscow; shamyarabist@gmail.com

 Владимир Муртузович АХМЕДОВ, кандидат исторических наук, старший научный сотрудник Института востоковедения РАН, Москва; shamyarabist@gmail.com

 ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4952-2964 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. For more details see: Lake A. Confronting Backlash States. *Foreign Affairs*. 1994. 73. No.2. URL: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/1994-03-01/confronting-backlash-states (accessed 10.10.2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)