

# Iran FM's Trip to Syria Was to Address 'Misunderstandings'

The recent visit of Iran's FM to Damascus was not ordinary. One of its main goals was to address a problem that had emerged between the two countries after the Turkish-Syrian meeting in Moscow.

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*All vital geopolitical issues in West Asia are connected to Damascus and Tehran in some way, and the two allies are well aware of their pivotal position in setting the region's political, and security course. When Iran and Syria weigh in on any crisis, matters can either get resolved or be scuttled altogether.*

Despite their respective domestic crises, and relentless western efforts to intensify internal dissent through economic blockades and sanctions, Damascus and Tehran remain a key axis in drawing the map of the region.

The relationship is not without disagreements however, and recently underwent some friction during Turkish-Syrian rapprochement efforts – particularly over the Moscow meeting of Turkish, Russian, and Syrian defense ministers last December.

A Syrian political source tells *The Cradle Arabic* that the visit of Iranian **Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian** to Damascus on 14 January was not merely to show that Tehran has overcome its domestic crisis, which started with protests in September before devolving into small but lethal riots.

In addition to reassuring his allies that Iran had matters in hand, Amir-Abdollahian sought to set right the confusion with Syria over the Moscow meeting. Damascus, according to the Syrian source, had not informed its Iranian ally of the extent of its contacts with Ankara, despite the fact that the Islamic Republic has frequently mediated between the two adversarial neighbors.

The source says the Turkish government kept Tehran apprised of developments in Moscow while Damascus did not, which upset the Iranians.

Turkish **Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu** did confirm after his meeting with Amir-Abdollahian on 17 January, that “Ankara informed Iran of the talks that have taken place so far between Turkiye and Syria, within the framework of coordination of the Astana track.”

This “mismanagement” or “lapse” in communication was swiftly dealt with in Damascus. As a sweetener, the Syrians heavily emphasized Iran’s role in the Astana Process toward advancing contacts and understandings with Ankara. Their respective foreign ministers’ speeches reiterated Tehran’s achievement in establishing the 2017 Astana talks and setting Turkish-Syrian communications on their current path.

## **Iran vs. Russia?**

The Tehran-Moscow relationship in Syria has its own special nuances: the west worries about the growing synergies between the two Eurasian powers on one hand – which on the other hand, tempts some western and Arab states to encourage “Russian influence” to reduce “Iranian influence” in the Levant.

Russia and Iran often have different takes on Syria’s most advantageous alliances as it emerges from a decade of war. While Tehran has focused on easing tensions between Damascus and Ankara, the Russians have instead pushed for the normalization of relations between Syria and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

When Saudi Arabia appeared reluctant to make a move toward Damascus, Russian **President Vladimir Putin** succeeded in appealing to the United Arab Emirates, which is one Gulf state keen to dilute “Iranian influence on Assad.”

The Russians want to draw up a new political map for Syria, which includes developing reconstruction plans and securing Gulf state support and investment – all within an integrated plan, accompanied by political changes, that include “non-terrorist” elements of the Syrian opposition.

Amir-Abdollahian’s visit also tackled the issue of Iranian **President Ebrahim Raisi’s** postponed trip to Syria earlier this year. While tensions inside Iran certainly played a role in delaying the president’s trip, Damascus’ deliberate failure to inform Tehran of the Moscow meeting in advance had also contributed to that decision.

Amir-Abdollahian’s visit was also aimed at placing the Raisi trip back on track. He spent three hours in [discussions with Assad](#) and their respective teams deliberating over the region’s many files – from Iranian nuclear talks in Vienna and rapprochement initiatives between Damascus and Ankara, to Tehran’s regional dialogues with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and others.

During the meeting, some emphasis was placed on external efforts to drive wedges between Iran and Syria. Assad stressed that Damascus is “keen on continuous communication and coordination of positions with Iran on a permanent basis, especially since Iran was one of the first countries to stand by the Syrian people in their war against terrorism,” and that this coordination “acquires paramount importance at this particular time, which is witnessing rapid regional and international developments, in order to achieve the common interests of the two countries.”

After Abdollahian’s Damascus stop, Syrian **Defense Minister Ali Abbas** also traveled to

Tehran to address the communication “lapse” over the Moscow meeting, develop further lines of cooperation between the two allies, and hinder foreign efforts to strain their relations.

## Joint strategic vision

Tehran, according to an Iranian official source, is confident that the rapprochement between Syria and Turkiye “serves its strategy that seeks mainly to remove US forces in the east of the Euphrates.”

One of the gains of the evolving relationship between Damascus and Ankara is the joint Iranian-Russian belief that Turkiye’s polarizing position within NATO is a strategic nail in the coffin of the US occupation in Syria.

Iran also sees that dialogue as serving another project: “An opportunity for countries that have been sanctioned by Washington to establish economic cooperation that enables them to form a supply chain that goes beyond the lines of blockade of US sanctions and mitigate their effects,” according to the Iranian official.

During his Damascus visit, Amir-Abdollahian and his Syrian counterpart, **Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad**, “agreed to renew the document of strategic cooperation between the two countries.” He stressed that his country has full confidence in the Syrian positions and decisions, and believes that any dialogue between Syria and Turkiye, if it is serious, is a positive step in the interest of the two countries and the region.

## More Iranian Oil for Syria

Given the extreme US blockade and sanctions against the Syrian people, Damascus is actively seeking ways to deepen and develop economic relations with Iran, especially in the sectors of energy, communications, and commodity exchange.

In a 15 January report, the [Wall Street Journal](#) portrayed economic ties between the two allies as wholly opportunistic: “Iran used cash and cheap oil to expand its influence in Syria, as Iran and Russia are the main military sponsors of Bashar al-Assad, which helps him suppress the revolution that began during the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011.”

In recent weeks, Iranian officials have reportedly told their Syrian counterparts that Damascus will now have to pay more for additional oil shipments, as demand peaks in winter. Tehran has also allegedly demanded that Damascus pay in advance for oil and rejected new requests for debt delivery.

But the reality is quite the opposite of western media claims. Syria has sought for many years to bypass efforts by the US to destroy its economy, through its oppressive blockade, sanctions, oil theft, and the imposition of armed militias to control key oil facilities. It was the Iranians who took the initiative to supply oil to the Syrian people, using an innovative “credit line” mechanism to avoid western sanctions.

But recently, Damascus has faced difficulties in being able to charter shipping vessels, and has asked the Iranian government to take over the function of transporting and shipping Iranian oil to Syria as *an additional service*, in addition to increasing its share of oil shipments.

The Iranian leadership has entrusted its Ministry of Petroleum and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Ismail Qaani to resolve this crisis by increasing Syria's share of Iranian oil and securing the necessary transportation vessels. The most recent oil ship arrived in the Syrian port of Baniyas on 17 January in a bid to ease the country's fuel crisis.

## **US-Israel fret over Iran-Syria arms production**

Despite ongoing rumors of rifts in Iranian-Syrian relations, joint military projects remain the clearest evidence of their expanding ties. In West Asia, no issue preoccupies Tel Aviv and Washington more than the localization of Iranian weapons production in allied states, like Syria.

On 11 January, [Newsweek](#) quoted a US-allied intelligence source saying that Iran "sought to establish a comprehensive air defense network in Syria by sending equipment and personnel to the war-torn Arab country," in a project that "Israel sought to thwart through repeated air strikes."

In a 9 January report on the [Geopolitical Intelligence Services](#) website, journalist Pierre Boussil writes that Iranian intelligence officers are collecting new, used, or partially destroyed military equipment from conflict areas in Syria, and "reverse engineering" these to develop weapons in factories established inside Syria.

*Reuters* also quotes western and regional intelligence sources claiming that Israel's illegal air strikes on Syria are aimed at Iranian missile production centers - to halt what it calls a "hidden military expansion" by Tehran.

The ceaseless patter of speculative media reports from countries hostile to the Syrian-Iranian "Axis of Resistance" confirm that this partnership has in no way frayed, and remains of utmost concern to the west and Israel. If anything, the relentless battering - economic, political, and military - of Syrian and Iranian targets ensures the robust, cooperative, and strategic enhancement of their mutual ties.

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