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Partners or Competitors?

The Future of the Iran-Russia Power Tandem in the Middle East

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Russian-Persian relations have a long pedigree. They go back to the Viking traders and raiders who pioneered the north-south trades routes from the Baltic Sea to the Black and Caspian Seas along the Dnieper and Volga Rivers. The Dnieper and Black Sea led to Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire and the Volga and Caspian to the Abbasid Caliphate, centered in Baghdad. The Vikings or Varangian mixed with the local Slavs in eastern Europe, in the Lake Ladoga region and then in Kyiv. This mix became known as the Rus.

The Rus sailed into the Black and Caspian Seas and traded on the southern and eastern shores of the Caspian, in territory today known as Dagestan, Azerbaijan, and Iran in the ninth and tenth centuries. They sold furs, slaves, and honey. They also conducted military raids—at times conquering territory and establishing strongholds. Some of these actions were sizeable. The 913 AD raid on Gorgon and Tabaristan on the southern and southeastern coasts of the Caspian involved five hundred ships. In 943 AD, another large raid, this time on the Caspian's west coast, captured Barda'a in present day Azerbaijan.

It is important to understand that, while ethnic Persians were certainly living along the southern coast of the Caspian, the Baghdad Caliphate was an Arab-run government albeit with substantial Persian influence that grew over time. Still, this Rus-Baghdad Caliphate interaction speaks to geopolitical conditions that remain in place to this day.

The Emergence of a Strong Muscovy and Persia

Since those first contacts, Russian-Persian relations have gone through many phases. Together Muscovy and the Safavid Empire emerged from the world created by the decline of the Mongol Empire in the fifteenth century. Only after Ivan (IV) the Terrible conquered the Khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan in the second half of the sixteenth century did Persia and Muscovy come into proximity. Pushing south from Astrakhan, Russian outposts, usually Cossacks, came into contact with Persians in the Caucasus, resulting in the first Persian-Russian war in the 1630s.

PUSHBACK
EXPOSING and COUNTERING IRAN

Pushback: Exposing and Countering Iran is a project of the Middle East Peace and Security Initiative. This series of reports examines the drivers, prospects, and constraints underpinning Iran's efforts to undermine US policy in the Middle East and restructure the regional order to its liking. Drawing on new digital forensic evidence and expert analysis, this effort offers strategic and policy recommendations to address the growing challenge Iran poses to stability in the Middle East.

By the late eighteenth century, a waxing Russian Empire was pushing hard against the waning Ottoman Empire to the southwest and Persians to the south. Over a century, this led to a series of successful wars for St. Petersburg against the Ottomans and the Persians, which gave them Crimea and Dagestan, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia in the Caucasus.

Moscow's advances against Persia were opposed by the United Kingdom, ever mindful of the approaches to the jewel in its colonial crown, India. By the end of the nineteenth century, Russia occupied Tehran, Tabriz, and other key cities in the north, and the British were on the ground in the south. In the Russian-British Entente 1907, which ended the Great Game and paved the way for the English-French-Russian alliance that fought in World War I, their respective positions in Persia were formalized with a neutral zone in the middle of the country to separate them. Moscow's occupation of Persia's principal cities fostered substantial anti-Russian sentiment in the country.

Persia and the Soviets

In 1921, after winning the Civil War, Russia's Bolshevik leaders were worried principally about international isolation. They dropped much of their revolutionary rhetoric in dealings with the outside world and sought better relations where they could, beginning with their neighbors. In this spirit, they concluded treaties of friendship with Afghanistan, Turkey, and Iran. Tehran welcomed the treaty as a respite from a century and a half of Russian pressure.

But this respite did not last long. During World War II, Iran was a neutral state under Reza Shah—whom the United Kingdom had put in power in the 1920s, but who was considered friendly to the Axis powers. To ensure the provision of Allied supplies through Iran to the Soviet Union, the Soviets occupied the north, and the British the south in 1941. Reza Shah was replaced by his son Mohammad Reza Shah.

Moscow's imperial interests in Iran did not end with the war. The Soviets tried to engineer the creation of the People's Republic of Azerbaijan and the Mahabad Republic (for Kurds). They only withdrew their troops from Iran in spring 1946, after Tehran brought the issue to the United Nations (UN) with firm American support. At one point in this crisis, President Truman thought it might lead to war.[1]

In 1955, Iran joined as a charter member the Baghdad Pact, an organization designed to resist Soviet designs, with the United States, the United Kingdom, Iraq, Turkey, and Pakistan.[2] Iraq left this organization in 1959, after the overthrow of its monarchy, and it became known as CENTO. While the organization languished, Iran's participation demonstrated its pro-Western orientation at the time. When the United Kingdom decided, for budgetary reasons, to withdraw its naval forces "east of Suez in 1970," the United States looked to Iran as a regional partner to help provide security in the Persian Gulf.

The Iranian Revolution

In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini overthrew the Shah of Iran via the Iranian Revolution, which replaced the monarchy with a theocratic regime. Given the Shah's close association with the United States, there was a strong anti-American element to the Iranian Revolution. This was exacerbated by the seizure of the US Embassy in November 1979 and the holding of most of the staff as hostages until the inauguration of Ronald Reagan as president in January 1981.

The Iranian Revolution shook the Middle East. Since the end of World War II, change in the Arab world and the broader Middle East was driven by secular forces. While the region was deeply Islamic and traditional monarchies flourished in the Gulf, self-proclaimed Arab socialists and leftists toppled monarchies in Libya, Egypt, Iraq, and regularly threatened the Hashemite dynasty in Jordan. The main powers in the region were Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt and the Ba'athists in Iraq and Syria. The victory of Khomeini changed all that. It signaled a revival of political activism by Islamic forces evident in the following decades by the emergence of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the occupied territories.

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1 Herbert Feis, *From Trust to Terror The Onset of the Cold War, 1945-1950* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970), 81-87.

2 While Iran appreciated the support of the West to deal with Soviet aggression in the north, there were also tensions between Tehran and London when the nationalist Mohammad Mossadegh was chosen prime minister in 1951. His nationalization of the Iranian oil industry, at the expense of British oil interests, sparked a crisis with the United Kingdom that eventually led to a coup organized by British and US intelligence—Operation Ajax—that brought down Mossadegh in 1953. The Tudeh Party, the Iranian Communist Party, founded with Soviet help in 1941, allied with Mossadegh and was banned after the coup.

Ayatollah Khomeini returning to Iran after 15 years of exile on February 1, 1979. *Photo credit*: Wikimedia.

The second Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December was the next event that shook the greater Middle East in 1979. Moscow intervened to ensure the survival of a communist regime that was under great pressure after a year in power.

Both events influenced Iranian-Russian relations. Looking at Revolutionary Iran's antipathy toward the United States—or "the Great Satan," in Khomeini's rhetoric—Moscow initially hoped for an opening in relations. But ideological and geopolitical factors prevented that.[3]

Khomeini's revolution was, in part, a religious reaction against the increasing secularization of the Middle East. The Soviet Union, a communist state promoting a policy of atheism, was anathema to Iran's ayatollahs and Khomeini referred to it as the "lesser Satan."

Geopolitical issues compounded the ideological differences. The first was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Besides propping up a communist government in that deeply Islamic country, the invasion meant that Soviet troops were on Iran's eastern border.

The other geopolitical complication was Moscow's long-standing relationship with Iraq. Since the overthrow of the monarchy in Baghdad in 1958, the Soviet Union had developed close relations with Iraq, and had signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1972 with Saddam Hussein—who had kicked Khomeini out of Iraq in the early 1970s. Moscow was also the major supplier of arms to Iraq.[4]

Seeing turmoil in Tehran as the Ayatollah Khomeini's government settled in, Saddam Hussein invaded in September 1980. He headed for Khuzestan in southwestern Iran, with its large ethnic Arab population,

3 Mark Katz, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the Putin Era," *Demokratizatsiya,* 2002, 69.

4 Katz, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the Putin Era," 70.

and racked up some early victories. But the invasion enabled the embattled theocratic regime to rally the Iranian people against a foreign aggressor.

For Moscow, the invasion was an unpleasant surprise. In an unsuccessful bid to win favor in Tehran, the Kremlin followed a policy of neutrality and "refused" to provide weapons to either side; but this refusal was nuanced as Moscow's Warsaw Pact allies continued to send weapons to the Iraqis.

By 1982, Tehran had stopped the Iraqi advance and began a counteroffensive. From this point forward, Moscow provided overt military assistance to Iraq.

The war finally stopped with a ceasefire in 1988, after Saddam Hussein had used chemical weapons against Iranian forces. The end to the fighting removed one major obstacle to better Soviet-Iranian relations. The withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in May 1989 removed another. The improved relations were evident in a June 1989 visit by President Rafsanjani to Moscow. The two sides agreed on the sales of advanced Russian fighters (MIG-29's) and bombers (SU-24's) to Iran.[5]

Russia and Iran in a Post-Soviet World

The implosion of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and the emergence fifteen independent states provided a new point of reference for relations between Iran and Russia. The death of the Soviet Union and its communist ideology meant that Russia was no longer a state promoting atheism, removing that ideological obstacle to better relations between the two countries. More importantly, the sudden appearance of the Newly Independent States brought new issues to the fore between Tehran and Moscow.

Iran and Russia shared a similar suspicion of Western interests in developing the hydrocarbon resources of Azerbaijan and the Central Asian countries, and specifically of transporting oil through the US-backed Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which bypasses both Iran and Russia.[6]

These overlapping interests also led to similar views on a new issue created by the collapse of the Soviet Union: the demarcation of the Caspian Sea. The use of the Caspian Sea had been determined by Iran and Soviet Russia, and then the Soviet Union in two agreements, the first in 1920 and the second in 1941. With the demise of the Soviet Union, instead of two, there were five littoral powers on the Caspian Sea with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan joining Iran and Russia. With a small shoreline, Iran's position regarding the demarcation of the Caspian was that its waters be divided equally, with every country getting a 20 percent share. Iran also wanted the resources of the Caspian—particularly the hydrocarbons in its seabed—to be shared equally. With this in mind, Tehran was opposed to the efforts by Kazakhstan and especially Azerbaijan to explore for oil and gas in Caspian waters that they claimed.

Moscow adopted a similar position in the early 1990's, but by the end of the decade, as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan moved toward oil production, it shifted its stance enough to allow Russian companies such as Lukoil and TNK-BP to participate in the projects. Even with this, Moscow and Tehran have still shared an interest in stopping the Trans-Caspian underwater gas pipeline project (Nabucco) and making sure, as the five countries agreed at the fourth Caspian Summit in Astrakhan in 2014, that only the littoral countries have the right to maintain military forces on the Caspian. In Central Asia, too, Iran and Russia found reason to cooperate in ending the civil war in Tajikistan.[7]

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan also led to Russian-Iranian cooperation. Three years after the withdrawal, in 1992, the communist regime of Najibullah fell. The victorious warlords whose combined efforts defeated Najibullah were then unable to make peace. A Hobbesian civil war involving multiple parties ensued. In this chaos, the militant Sunni Taliban movement

5 Robert Freedman, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the 1990s," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (2000).

6 Robert Freedman, "Russian Policy toward the Middle East: The Yeltsin Legacy ant the Putin Challenge," Middle East Journal (2001), 71.

7 Tajikistan is a Sunni Muslim country whose language is Dari, a variety of Persian very close to Farsi. At independence, a civil war broke out between the government and an opposition in which the Islamic Renaissance Party played a leading role. In the early stages of the war, Russia and Uzbekistan intervened to prevent the opposition from tossing out the government. By the mid-90s, an international mediation effort began under UN auspices with Russia and Iran playing leading roles. An agreement ending the civil war was reached in 1997. Tehran pursued a pragmatic, not ideological policy in Tajikistan. Its lever in Tajikistan was the Islamic Renaissance Party. Yet, instead of supporting its efforts to take over the country in the name of Islam, Iran's leadership pushed it toward compromise.

emerged. Well-disciplined by local standards and supported by Pakistan, the Taliban captured Kabul and established power in 1994. Their persecution of the Shia Hazara made the Taliban enemies in Tehran. Their promotion of Salafi extremism and interest in extending it into Central Asia made them enemies in Moscow. So, by the mid-1990s, Moscow and Tehran were supporting the Northern Alliance—Uzbek, Tajik, and Hazara forces in northern Afghanistan opposed to the Taliban.

The American Factor

If the local issues that emerged from the implosion of the Soviet Union brought Tehran and Moscow closer, one important global development had the opposite effect—the new US-Russian relationship. Of course, the Soviet Union and the United States were adversaries in a forty-five-year Cold War. But the new Russia and the United States were not. They were, or at least sought to be, partners.

Under President Yeltsin, Russia sought close relations with the United States to help in its transformation into a prosperous market economy and to integrate into world economic and political institutions (the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the Group of Seven, which Moscow joined in 1997, as it became the Group of Eight).

At the same time, US-Iranian relations remained difficult. For the Iranian regime, the United States was still the "Great Satan" and its Israeli ally the "Little Satan." And Iran still resented the close US relationship with the Gulf Arabs, especially Saudi Arabia, and saw the presence of US Fifth Fleet in the Arabian Sea, and especially in the Persian Gulf, as a strategic threat.

The United States saw the mullahs' Iran as a creator of instability in the Middle East and a sponsor of terrorism. Hezbollah in Lebanon was a creature of Iran that appeared in the wake of Israel's ill-fated invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Hezbollah led the resistance against Israel's occupation of a slice of southern Lebanese territory as a cordon sanitaire. (The Israelis withdrew under the growing military pressure in 2000.) Hezbollah was responsible for the terror attacks on the Israeli Embassy (1992) and the Jewish Community Center (1994) in Buenos Aires.[8]

While Moscow, by and large, did not want international issues to complicate its relationship with Washington in the early and mid-1990s, it nonetheless pursued closer relations with Tehran on the host of issues above, and on more sensitive matters.[9] Specifically, Moscow agreed to complete work on the Bushehr nuclear reactor that West Germany had initiated in the 1970s and suspended after the Iranian Revolution. Moscow's Bushehr decision was driven partly by its forceful director of the Federal Agency of Atomic Energy, Viktor Mikhaylov, who wanted the revenue from the deal.

Financial interests were also important in Moscow continuing the sale of advanced weaponry to Iran after the fall of the Soviet Union. Throughout the 1990s, Russia was the major arms supplier to Iran.[10]

The Priority of the Bilateral Relationship for Moscow and Tehran

By the mid-1990s the bilateral relationship between Russia and Tehran was important enough to prompt both capitals to compromise with other policy priorities and interests.

Moscow, for instance, was willing to risk at least some tension in its relationship with Washington, for whom Russian building of the Bushehr Reactor (completed in 2011) and sale of advanced weaponry to Iran were major irritants. At a May 1995 summit, President Yeltsin refused to end Moscow's work on Bushehr, although he did agree to cancel a sale of gas centrifuges that, President Clinton argued, would speed the development of Iranian nuclear weapons.[11]

At a June 1995 meeting of Vice President Gore and Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, Russia agreed to provide no new weapons once current contracts were fulfilled. This agreement would have put an end to Russian arms sales to Iran by 1999; but Moscow never carried out the commitment and, covertly, concluded new weapons deals.[12] Washington's opposition to such sales only

8 "Terrorism: Bombings in Argentina," Jewish Virtual Library, March 17, 1992, http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/terrorist-bombings-in-argentina.

9 Helen Belopolsky, *Russia and the Challengers: Russian Alignment with China, Iran, and Iraq in the Unipolar Era* (Oxford: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009), 98.

10 Kuang Keng Kuek Ser, "Where did Iran get its military arms over the last 70 years?" *Public Radio International,* June 1, 2016, https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-06-01/where-did-iran-get-its-military-arms-over-last-70-years.

11 Freedman, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the 1990s."

12 Broder, John. "Despite a Secret Pact by Gore in '95, Russian Arms Sales to Iran Go On." *New York Times*, October 13, 2000, http://

Soviet tankmen of the Sixth Armored Division drive through the streets of Tabriz on their T-26 battle tank on August 27-28, 1941. *Photo credit*: Wikimedia.

grew, as evident in the Iran Sanctions Act 1996, which levied strict sanctions on Iran in order to prevent it from developing nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction and advanced missiles.

Iran's willingness to compromise, at least partly, its standing in the Islamic world for the sake of its relationship with Russia was evident during Russia's first (December 1994–August 1996) and Second (August 1999—2009) Chechen Wars. While some Iranian politicians criticized Moscow's brutal tactics in Chechnya, Iran's official position only called for respect for the people of Chechnya.[13]

Russian-Iranian ties faced an even greater test in the second Chechen War, which began in August 1999. This was a more sensitive issue for Tehran because it was chair of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1999, and Moscow's saturation bombing sparked outrage in the Islamic world.[14] Iran tried to mute criticism of Russia by stressing that the war was an internal Russian matter. But soon it was amping up its criticism in response to pressure from others in the OIC.

In turn, the Russians began to publicly fault Iran as another country supporting the Chechen fighters. Moscow also turned down a fall 1999 offer by Tehran to mediate the conflict.[15] The pressures on the Russian-Iranian relationship caused by the war diminished over time and as Iran rotated out of the leadership role in the OIC; as, in the middle of 2000, Moscow turned the responsibility for much of the fighting to local actors; and as the Russian military operation ceased in 2002.

www.nytimes.com/2000/10/13/world/despite-a-secret-pact-by-gore-in-95-russian-arms-sales-to-iran-go-on.html.

13 Fred Halliday, "The Empires Strike Back? Russia, Iran and the New Republics," Royal Institute of International Affairs, (1995).

14 Freedman, "Russian Policy toward the Middle East: The Yeltsin Legacy and the Putin Challenge," 71.

15 Freedman, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the 1990s."

In the Balkans, in the mid- and late 1990s, Moscow and Tehran were on opposite sides.[16] Tehran was sending arms and facilitating the transit of fighters to aid the Kosovars and their quest for independence. Moscow was strongly supporting Serbia's efforts to retain control there. While US support for Kosovo was a source of major tension in the US-Russian relationship, neither Moscow nor Tehran let their opposing policies in the Balkans complicate their otherwise excellent bilateral relationship.

The Importance of Domestic Politics: Iran

The election of moderate Mohammad Khatami as Iran's president in May 1997 opened the prospect of better relations between Washington and Tehran after over seventeen years of hostility. Khatami sought domestic liberalization and rapprochement with the Arab world, Europe, and the United States. Khatami proposed to improve relations with the United States in a December 1997 CNN speech; In January, President Clinton responded positively and then waived some sanctions against international companies working on Iran's South Pars gas field. But, when Secretary of State Albright proposed measures to achieve reconciliation, Khatami did not respond; pressures from conservative quarters were too great.[17]

Another chance came when the United States was working to create a stable government in Kabul after its intervention had toppled the Taliban in late 2001. According to US Ambassador James Dobbins, who was coordinating international efforts on this issue, the Iranians were "comprehensively helpful" in forging support across the various ethnic groups in Afghanistan in support of the Karzai government. (Moscow also supported this objective.) The Iranians made it clear that they wanted this to be the first step to closer relations with the United States; but Washington was not interested.[18] Instead, in his State of the Union speech in January 2002, President George W. Bush lumped Iran in with Iraq and North Korea as the "axis of evil."

This brief period of US-Iranian cooperation was possible because—at least at the government level under President Khatami—there were officials looking to better relations with the United States. These circumstances changed for the worse in the 2005 presidential elections. The victory of anti-American firebrand Mahmoud Ahmadinejad then and his re-election in 2009 underscored that no rapprochement with the United States was in the offing. But Ahmadinejad's 2009 election win was controversial. His opponent Mir Hossein Mousavi claimed that the election results were fraudulent and his supporters poured into the streets of the capital by the hundreds of thousands to protest—the Green Revolution.

The Green Revolution flared out under heavy government repression; but among the many signs carried by the protesters were some sharply critical of Russia (and China) for their support for the regime. This is another indication that a future liberalizing Iran would seek better relations with Washington and would look on Russia with skepticism due to its close relations with the theocrats currently running the country.

The Importance of Domestic Politics: Russia

The lesson from all of this is that hardline or nationalist forces in Iran and Russia are natural allies because they see the West, and especially the United States, as their principal opponents. This means that changes in Russian politics concerning policies toward the West can also influence Moscow's evolving relationship with Tehran.

While disappointed by a NATO expansion that included some former Warsaw Pact members and by NATO's actions against Serbia, President Yeltsin was still pursuing a largely Western-oriented foreign policy in 1997. So, for him, the appearance of Khatami was not necessarily a problem. But, for the conservative forces in the military and intelligence services who were deeply suspicious of the West, Khatami's election was a potentially dangerous development.

Vladimir Putin's winning the Russian presidency in 2000 meant that a new vision would direct Russian foreign policy. Very much a man of the KGB (*Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti*), which he had served for nearly twenty years, Putin was much more skeptical of the West than Yeltsin. In his first few years in office, this was not reflected clearly in Russian policy. The first Putin-Bush summit in the spring of 2001 highlighted US-Russian cooperation. And Putin was the first to call President George Bush after the September 11 terrorist

16 Freedman, "Russian Policy toward the Middle East: The Yeltsin Legacy and the Putin Challenge," 71.

17 Freedman, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the 1990s."

18 "Iran Gave U.S. Help On Al Qaeda After 9/11," CBS News, http://www.cbsnews.com/news/iran-gave-us-help-on-al-qaeda-after-9-11/.

attacks, and did not object publicly when the United States established military bases in Central Asia to conduct the war against the Taliban.

Yet, even in his most western-friendly period, Putin had a very different approach to Russian priorities. He saw little reason to accommodate Washington's concerns regarding Iran, and he canceled, in his first year as president, the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreements that limited Russian arms sales to Tehran.[19]

Putin also invited President Khatami to Moscow in 2001. This visit was facilitated by a Khatami statement suggesting that no rapprochement with the United States was in the offing—this was prior to the US-Iranian cooperation on Afghanistan noted above—and by the fact that Iranian-Russian tensions over the Second Chechen War were receding. During this visit, the two sides concluded a defense agreement that stated, "if one of the sides will be exposed to an aggression of some state, the other side must not give any help to the aggressor."[20] While this agreement had limited scope—since it did not require either side to defend the other under attack—it still represented a public affirmation of closer bilateral ties, which would have been unimaginable under the Yeltsin government.

Over time, Mr. Putin became ever more critical of US policy. Perhaps the most important factor for Putin's turn in this direction was the outbreak of "colored revolutions," quasi-spontaneous civil uprisings against autocratic leaders in Serbia (2001), Georgia (2003), and Ukraine (2004).[21] The United States supported these developments as the work of democratic civil society. The Kremlin believed (and believes to this day) that these events were run by the United States. Barely two years after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the Russian President delivered a fiery speech at the Munich Security Conference (February 2007) that sharply criticized US policy.[22]

"The growing distance between the United States and Russia under President Putin meant that Moscow felt little need to accommodate Washington as it sought to stop Iran's nuclear program."

Iran's Nuclear Program

The growing distance between the United States and Russia under President Putin meant that Moscow felt little need to accommodate Washington as it sought to stop Iran's nuclear program. But that did not mean Moscow was always willing to support Tehran as international concern grew about its nuclear ambitions. Moscow did not want to be isolated in supporting Iran. While there were moments that Moscow, along with China, prevented decisions against Iran's nuclear program in the UN Security Council (UNSC), Moscow did not want to be too distant from Europe on this issue—France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and, later, the European Union (EU).

The EU and most interested European countries were less interested than the United States in sanctioning Iran. Many had major business agreements with the Iranians that would have been put at risk. At the same time, these countries understood the importance of stopping nuclear proliferation. In short, Moscow would be willing to consider sanctions when Europe headed in that direction.

As for Iran, it has wanted and perhaps expected Russian protection for its nuclear program at the UN, but it did not treat Moscow as a partner. It kept important details of its activity a secret from the Kremlin, which like the rest of the international community was unpleasantly surprised more than once by Iranian nuclear developments.[23] Such surprises made Moscow less likely to bear the international burden of shielding Tehran from sanction. At times, these surprises also prompted the Kremlin to take punitive steps against Iran.

19 Robert Freedman, "Russia, Iran and the Nuclear Question: the Putin Record," Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College (2006), 31.

20 Freedman, "Russia, Iran and the Nuclear Question: the Putin Record," 44.

21 Akbar Ganji, "Can Iran Trust Russia?" *The National Interest*, May 3, 2016, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/can-iran-trust-russia-16027.

22 "10 Years On: Putin's Munich Speech Still Resonates." *21st Century Wire*, February 12, 2017, http://21stcenturywire.com/2017/02/12/10-years-on-putins-munich-speech-still-resonates/.

23 Freedman, "Russia, Iran and the Nuclear Question: the Putin Record," 45.

US concern about Iran's growing nuclear capacity had kept this issue on the global agenda since the early 1990s, as Moscow worked on the Bushehr Reactor. But international concern reached a new level when, in August of 2002, the Mujahideen-e-Khalq, a terrorist organization opposed to the regime in Tehran, announced that Iran had built nuclear plants near Natanz and Arak.[24] This news also irritated Moscow, which expressed its displeasure with a slowdown of work on Bushehr.

The revelation of Iran's secret nuclear program brought the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) into action. In September 2003, the IAEA issued a resolution that demanded Iran suspend all nuclear enrichment and reprocessing activities and to permit IAEA inspectors to take environmental samples at any location in Iran. In October, Iran accepted the IAEA conditions under an agreement negotiated by European foreign ministers. In June 2004, when the IAEA criticized Iran for not permitting access to its inspectors, Tehran announced that, contrary to the agreement, it would not stop enriching uranium. But by November, Iran agreed to suspend uranium enrichment while talks proceeded with France, Germany, and the UK.

A Russian Effort to Tamp Down the Crisis

At this point, Moscow tried to enter the dispute in a way designed to maintain its close relationship with Tehran and demonstrate its influence to Europe. In February of 2005, Moscow and Tehran signed a nuclear fuel supply agreement under which Russia would provide fuel for the Bushehr reactor and Iran would return the spent nuclear fuel to Russia, which would prevent Iran from extracting plutonium, which could be used for nuclear weapons.

Over the following six years—until the opening of the Bushehr plant in 2011 with the supply of enriched nuclear fuel from Russia—the facility was a source of tension in the bilateral relationship. At times, Moscow slowed down work on it due to concerns with Iran's position on the nuclear issue—and to encourage Iran to accept Moscow's proposal that it should receive enriched uranium from Russia rather than produce its own—and at least once for reported Iranian non-payment of contractual obligations.

Moscow's February 2005 agreement with Tehran did not stop the crisis from deepening. When Iran began producing uranium in Isfahan, the IAEA adopted a resolution saying Iran was in noncompliance with its safeguard agreement (September 2005), which put this issue under the purview of the UN Security Council. In February 2006, with no change in Iran's position, the IAEA referred the problem to the UNSC. In April 2006, Iran announced that it enriched uranium to 3.5 percent at the Natanz facility.

In June 2006, the five permanent members of the UNSC—China, France, Russia, the UK, and the United States—and Germany (P5+1) offered a framework agreement with incentives for Iran to suspend uranium enrichment. The next month, the UNSC issued Resolution 1696, which called on Iran to stop enrichment and reprocessing activities. In the months that followed, Washington pushed for sanctions on Iran.

In December, with Resolution 1737, the UNSC imposed sanctions on Iran for failing to stop its enrichment program. The sanctions, which called for freezing the assets of ten Iranian organizations and twelve individuals involved in the nuclear program, did not prevent Iranian President Ahmadinejad from insisting that enrichment would continue.

This in turn prompted the UNSC to issue further sanctions (Resolution 1747) in March 2007. While Moscow, with China, was more reluctant than the other permanent members of the Security Council (the United States, France, and the UK) to sanction Iran, in the face of visible Iranian intransigence, it would eventually agree to sanctions. The same pattern persisted with sanctions in March 2008.

Moscow tried to reduce Iranian unhappiness with its support for sanctions by arguing that its diplomats had worked to delay or had in fact weakened the sanctions language in UNSC resolutions.[25] While these arguments had the virtue of often being true, the Iranian government and media, as Mark Katz points out, did not find this argument persuasive. Still, Iranian unhappiness with Moscow's (eventual) support for sanctions did not interfere with the overall development of relations. Putin was received with higher protocol

24 Arms Control Association, "Timeline of Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran," August 2016, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheet/Timeline-of-Nuclear-Diplomacy-With-Iran.

25 Mark Katz, "Iran and Russia"; United States Institute of Peace, The Iran Primer, August 2015, http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-russia.

treatment than other heads of state when he arrived in Tehran for the summit of the five Caspian nations in October 2007.

Moscow Suspends the S-300 Sale

The revelation by US intelligence in September 2009 that Iran had a second, hardened nuclear enrichment facility at Fordow, and the news in February 2010, that Iran had begun producing 20 percent enriched uranium (a large step toward producing an atomic bomb) led to a renewed push by the United States for stronger sanctions. This time, there was less pushback from Moscow. In fact, after the Fordow revelation, in the fall of 2009, Moscow chose to suspend the sale of advance S-300 surface-to-air missiles to Iran. In June 2010, Moscow and Beijing agreed to UNSC 1929, which enhanced proliferations-related sanctions and banned tests for missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons; it also banned the transfer of major weapons systems to Iran.

The course of negotiations on the Iran nuclear program was perhaps the low point for Iranian-Russian relations. And, it was the last time that this issue caused friction between the two countries.

In the next round, Moscow sought to help shape the international reaction to another unpleasant revelation: Iran's June 2011 announcement that it would triple the production rate of 20 percent enriched uranium. The next month, Russia offered a plan in which Iran would increase cooperation with the IAEA in exchange for the gradual reduction of sanctions. In October, the EU offered talks with Iran on the Russian suggestion of confidence-building measures, and the Iranians responded positively, albeit only in February. At the same time, Tehran announced further developments of its nuclear program.

This was an interesting period in the diplomacy surrounding Iran's nuclear program. Both sides were simultaneously hardening their positions and affirming their interests in talking. In December 2011, the United States added additional sanctions, and in January, the EU announced that as of July, its members would be forbidden to buy Iranian oil. This period did not test seriously the Iranian-Russian relationship. Moscow had no intention of sanctioning Iran, and the interest of the United States and the Europeans in maintaining talks with Tehran meant that they were not looking for sanctions through the UNSC.

A series of P5+1 talks followed with little progress through April 2013, when it was announced, following a meeting in Almaty, that no further talks were scheduled.

In June, however, Hassan Rouhani won Iran's presidential elections. Rouhani was no liberalizer like Khatami, nor was he an anti-Western demagogue like Ahmadinejad. Rouhani was, in fact, a former player in Iran's nuclear program talks and just after his August inauguration, he called for renewed talks. In September, the P5+1 foreign ministers meet to discuss a new, promising proposal set out by Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif.

From this point forward, negotiations continued until July 2015, when an agreement on Iran's nuclear program was reached.

As negotiations neared their conclusion, the Kremlin removed an old irritant to its colleagues in Tehran; in April, Moscow lifted the ban on the supply of the S-300 advanced air defense missile system.[26] In October, Iran and the P5+1 ratified the nuclear deal, but not before Iran tested the Emad, a medium-range ballistic missile that, experts say, can deliver a 750 kg nuclear payload over 1700 kilometers—a clear violation of UNSC Resolution 1929. In November, Tehran conduced another test. While these tests led to new American sanctions, they did not lead to new action at the UN Security Council. Russian-Iranian relations had come through in fine fettle the over thirteen years of intense, and at times acrimonious, diplomacy between the revelation of Iran's secret nuclear program in 2002, and the ratifying of an agreement by the P5+1.

Syria

It is just a coincidence that the breakthrough on the Iranian nuclear deal occurred at roughly the same time as Moscow's decision to escalate substantially its intervention in Syria in support of Bashir al-Assad's Alawite regime. But it is no coincidence that this decision was taken after Iranian Revolutionary Guard Major General Qassem Soleiman's Moscow consultations in July 2015. The Soleiman visit followed a meeting in Tehran months earlier between Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and Iranian Supreme leader Khameini, in which the two sides agreed to amplify their cooperation in support of the Alawite regime.

The Syrian crisis goes back to March 2011, when peaceful protests against Assad's government were

26 Katz, "Iran and Russia."

President of Russia Vladimir Putin meets President of Iran Hassan Rouhani in Moscow on March 28, 2017.
Photo credit: Website of the Kremlin.

brutally put down with scores and eventually hundreds of civilian deaths. Surprisingly, the repression did not stop the protests; but by the fall of 2011, they did provoke a military response and civil war ensued.

But, it was and remains a multi-sided civil war with several parties, and fighting has often been between opposition groups as well as between those groups and the government. Moscow and Tehran's interests in Syria have been quite similar. They both see Assad's regime as a longtime ally for specific reasons. In Iran's case, there are both ideological reasons and raison d'etat. The big ideological fault line in the Middle East is between the Shia (Iran) and heavy majority Sunni. The Alawites in Syria, who represent perhaps 10 percent of the population, are an offshoot of Shia Islam. While their religious bona fides are not completely accepted by the Shia, their heterodoxy poses an even more fundamental problem with the Sunni, who also comprise a large majority in Syria.

This makes the Alawite regime a natural ally for Iran. And this natural ally has been very helpful as a conduit for Iran's supplies for the Shia militia, Hezbollah, that it helped create in Lebanon in the wake of Israel's 1982 invasion. Hezbollah is a major player in Lebanon that projects Iranian influence. This alone is reason for Tehran to support the Assad regime.

Moscow, too, has major interests in Syria, and particularly in the Assad regime. Syria is Moscow's longest standing partner in the Middle East and hosts its naval base at Tartus. Moscow has been allied with the Assad family since the 1960s, when Hafez al-Assad was first Syria's defense minister and then president. Moscow also has expressed strong opposition to the concept of "colored revolutions" throwing out "legitimate" authoritarian governments via popular revolt. So, it too has both ideological and geopolitical reasons for backing the Alawite regime.

Both Moscow and Iran provided support early for the Assad regime, once armed opposition groups appeared in the fall of 2011. Both supplied arms and then advisers. As the various opposition forces made gains at the expense of the Assad government, Iran

also sent Hezbollah fighters into Syria. While this improved Assad's position temporarily, it did not change the overall trend of the fighting, which was to Assad's disadvantage.

This trend became particularly pronounced late in 2014 and into the fall of 2015. Moscow made the decision to employ major air assets, because it shared Iran's fear that otherwise Assad might fall. One important factor enabling Moscow to take this decision was the effective absence of the United States. Since the failure of his policy in Libya—with the removal of Muammar al-Qaddafi leading to chaos in which Salafi extremist groups flourished— US President Obama was gun shy about intervening decisively in Syria to bring down Assad, whom he labeled "illegitimate" after the heavy repression of Syria's peaceful protesters in 2011.[27]

As of this writing, Moscow's air campaign has been a large success. It almost immediately stopped the erosion of Assad's position; and by the spring and summer of 2016, with the use of saturation bombing against rebel positions in towns and other civilian locations, enabled the Alawite regime to take back territory on the road to Aleppo in the west of the country. This operation also led to the displacement of millions of people, many of whom fled to Turkey and then Europe, greatly exacerbating the refugee crisis there.

Moscow's success in Syria greatly burnished its prestige in the Arab world, even with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who were supporting Salafi opposition groups in Syria. Moscow welcomed this opportunity to enhance relations with especially the Gulf Arabs—a point where Russian and Iranian interests diverge—but there were limits to this. Ultimately, while the Gulf Arabs might admire Putin's daring in Syria, and lament American caution, their goals remain at odds with Moscow's support for Assad. So, this potential point of conflict between Moscow and Tehran is not likely to grow soon.

"The relationship between Moscow and Tehran in the post-Soviet period, and even more since Vladimir Putin became Russia's president in 2000, has been remarkable for its closeness and constancy."

The close cooperation between Moscow and Tehran in Syria also serves Moscow's interests in another way. The Kremlin had one reservation about the Iran nuclear deal: the removal of Western sanctions might lead to a rapprochement between Iran and the West, particularly the United States. Iran's strong support for Assad in Syria, just like its use of terrorism, is an obstacle to that rapprochement.

The Trajectory of Russian-Iranian Relations

The relationship between Moscow and Tehran in the post-Soviet period, and even more since Vladimir Putin became Russia's president in 2000, has been remarkable for its closeness and constancy. The March 2017 summit between presidents Putin and Rouhani echoed this. The two sides reinforced their joint efforts in Syria, expressed their support for the Iranian nuclear deal, announced their opposition to "unilateral sanctions," and stated their concern about maintaining the territorial integrity of Iraq."[28]

For approximately four hundred years Iran (Persia) and Russia have been neighbors with very different cultures, religions, and political orientations. And, for most of this time, as the Russian Empire (and the

27 Obama rightly recognized that the various moderate opposition groups who might pursue policies acceptable to us were in fact too weak to win power. The momentum was with various Islamist groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate, or Ahrar al-Sham, or the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which only emerged in the spring of 2013. Syria also provided for a moment of US-Russian cooperation. In 2012, while domestic pressure was building in the United States to supply the moderate opposition forces with weapons, Obama, who wanted to avoid that course, said that he would take military action against the Assad regime if it used chemical weapons against its own people. (See, for example, President Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps," August 20, 2012, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps.) Obama used that statement at the time to help reduce the pressure on him to act. But the statement came back to haunt him in the summer of 2013, when it became apparent that the Syrian government had, in fact used, chemical weapons. While American supporters of intervention in Syria were pushing the president to make good on his statement, the Russians offered an out. They would persuade the Syrian government to give up their chemical weapons under the supervision of the UN if the United States did not strike. This settled the matter.

28 Mark N. Katz, "Assessing the Putin-Rouhani Summit," *Lobe Log, March 29, 2017, https://lobelog.com/assessing-the-putin-rouhani-summit/.*

Soviet Union) ascended and expanded south, Moscow has put pressure on Tehran and was perceived as an adversary.

Against this backdrop, the post-Soviet era stands out. The ups and downs of bilateral ties in this timeframe are real, but minor. The reasons for this are not hard to find. Both identify the United States as their principal foe.

In the case of Iran, this began as an ideological fixation. Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran's theocratic regime has identified the United States as the "Great Satan." But it has taken on important geopolitical dimensions, as the ayatollahs sought to build their position in the Middle East by seeking to destabilize their Sunni Arab rivals and by the liberal use of terrorism. Under President Khatami, Tehran flirted briefly with Washington twice, first right after his election and again after the September 11 attack. Tehran shut down the first flirtation and Washington the second.

In the case of post-Soviet Russia, it is a bit more complicated because President Yeltsin's principal foreign policy objective was to cultivate good relations with the United States and other Western powers as he sought to transform the economy and modernize the country. Yet even in that period, the Kremlin was pursuing the illiberal "frozen conflicts" policy in its "Near Abroad"—a policy designed to minimize US influence in the area. This policy was an important basis for cooperation with Iran.

From the start, President Putin's overall outlook was quite different from Yeltsin's. Over time, Putin's hostility to the United States became a major, if not the main, theme of his foreign policy.

This mutual hostility to the United States is not, however, something that can be assumed as normal. It has been the distinguishing feature of Iranian policy since 1979; and the Iranian opposition before then—both leftist and clerical—blamed the United States for the Shah's rule and, with the UK, for the coup against Mossadegh. But there was no long history of US-Iranian conflict or even tensions.

During the Soviet period, relations between Moscow and Washington were difficult, but there, too, the ideological factor loomed large. Putting that period aside, US-Russian relations have largely been business-like, if not cordial. This too could recur.

The failed Green Revolution demonstrated that a large number of Iranians were tired of the clerical regime. Most polls have also shown that a majority in Iran would welcome friendship with the United States.[29] If the clerical regime either produces a real liberal leader, or gives way to a secular government, rapprochement with the United States will follow, and much of the energy currently driving the Russian-Iranian relationship will disappear. The United States will be able to maintain good relations with the Gulf and other Sunni Arabs and with Israel, as it develops closer ties with Iran. It managed that feat from the late 1940s until Khomeini took over in Tehran.

On the Russian side, an increasingly authoritarian Putin seems well ensconced in power. But if his popularity ten years ago was related to the booming economy that he was stewarding, today it is based on a comprehensive media campaign and an aggressive foreign policy that his stalled economy will find trouble sustaining. Here too, at some point, change is to be expected.

This suggests that, in the not too distant future, the Moscow-Tehran axis will diminish in importance.[30] Until then, we should expect more cooperation between the two capitals, and it will be hard, for instance, for a new US president to rope Moscow into helping revise the Iranian nuclear deal.

After that, Russian strategists may ask themselves why Moscow enabled Tehran to build a nuclear program and ballistic missiles. The Emad can deliver a nuclear payload well into southern Russia. As Iran develops more capable missiles, Moscow and much of the country will be reachable. There is little reason to expect the largely cooperative relations between the two countries to endure once the anti-American animus of their policies disappears.

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29 Most, but not all polls show this; but all without exception would like better relations with Europe. Barbara Slavin, "New Poll Says Iranians Like Zarif, Dislike U.S.," US News & World Report, February 3, 2016, https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-02-03/new-poll-says-iranians-like-zarif-dislike-us.

30 Even at the height of their cooperation in Syria, Iranian distrust of the Kremlin was apparent. For convenience sake, Tehran briefly permitted Russian planes to launch bombing runs in Syria from Iranian bases; but once Moscow announced this, Iran banned Russian planes.

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