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The Russo-Ukrainian War's Effects on Russian-Iranian Relations¹

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The Russo-Ukrainian War continues to present challenges to Western, Ukrainian, and Russian military strategists and planners because of the frequency of unforeseen changes and events on the ground. The Middle East has also witnessed numerous events unfold since 2022 that have been just as unforeseen as those in Ukraine. Since the start of Russian president Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the relationship between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran has grown significantly and has resulted in tangible battlefield effects in both Ukraine and the Middle East. Before the collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria in early December 2024, one could have made the argument that a Russian victory in Ukraine would mean an Iranian "win" in the Middle East. However, this argument has become extraordinarily complicated due to the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, the fall of al-Assad's regime (Iran's most credible Middle Eastern ally at the state level), and the pending start of the second administration of U.S. president-elect Donald J. Trump.

Modern Russian-Iranian Relations

The modern Russian-Iranian relationship is based on each country's mutual interests and lack of partnering options. Both countries share concerns regarding cultural preservation, existential security, and providing counterweights to U.S. influence, both regional and global. Each has long-held external security concerns that have manifested in the very acts that have given the West cause to levy sanctions on both. Despite these shared concerns, it should be noted that Russia and Iran have historically been at odds with each other. The Soviet Union supported Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), and Iran supported Afghan opposition forces during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–89). Nevertheless, by the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Soviet arms imports to Iran were valued at \$772 million (USD). This quantity dropped shortly thereafter, however, partially due to a secret U.S.-Russian deal to limit sales to Iran. Since then, Iran's mistrust has led to its seeking self-reliance, which has resulted in improving its domestic arms production to the point of being a proliferator.² Despite historical mistrust and animosity, Russia and Iran have few options today other than the other with whom to conduct a military and/or economic partnership.

Russia and Iran use one another as a means to mitigate perceived threats to their geographic peripheries. These concerns and objectives manifested in Syria as the tangible foundation of current Russian-Iranian relations beginning in September 2015, with the start of Russia's military intervention to defend al-Assad's regime following a visit to Moscow by Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps' (IRGC) Qods Force, to request Russian assistance in Syria.³ Putin agreed to provide air support to Iranian-supported ground forces and signed a treaty with Syria, allowing for long-term Russian use of the Humeimim air base on Syria's coast.⁴

Whereas Iran seeks security, Russia seeks power. Syria provided Russia with an opportunity to help regain its position as a great power by supporting an existing regime against U.S.-supported rebels. Russia was also able to reestablish and expand its Soviet-era warm-water port of Tartus in northwestern Syria, providing a previously nonexistent naval presence in the Mediterranean. Russia supported Tartus by using its Black Sea Fleet, based in Crimea, until Turkey enacted the Montreux Convention of 1936, restricting Russia's usage of the Black Sea following its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.⁵ As of 17 December 2024, Russian vessels have pulled out of Tartus, their final destination yet to be determined. In addition to providing force projection into the Mediterranean, Tartus and Humeimim served as logistical hubs for private military companies, such as the Wagner Group, to send forces and supplies to several African countries, including Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.⁶ The loss of these

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Syrian bases will likely pose major logistical problems for Russia's continued power and influence projection in Africa.

Prior to its invasion of Ukraine, Russia held the advantage in its relationship with Iran. However, just months into the war, Russia, depleted of missiles, requested Iranian assistance to regain the battlefield initiative. Outmatched by Ukrainian drones, Russia needed access to Iranian drones, which were already being used successfully throughout the Middle East, particularly by Yemen's Houthi movement and Iraqi Shi'ite militias allied with Iran, serving as a deterrent to Iran's adversaries. Russia's need for Iranian drones persists and has upended the bilateral relationship's balance and expanded its scope. Of note, despite Iran's assistance to Russia, most Iranians do not support Russia's cause against Ukraine. Iranians do not believe the Russian narrative of protecting ethnic Russians/Ukrainians from Ukraine's "nazi regime" and/or that Ukraine's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was imminent.⁷ Additionally, the 2022 Democracy Perception Index reported that 50 percent of Iranians held negative views of Russia, signifying underlying mistrust.⁸ This may be based in Iran's collective memory of nineteenth-century Russian territorial gains in the Caucasus at the expense of Iran. Iranians may also simply assume that Russia's partnership with Iran will last only as long as Iran's usefulness in the Russo-Ukrainian War.

The Impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War *Military Impact*

Russian-Iranian cooperation has expanded since the Russo-Ukrainian War began, primarily along two avenues: military and economy. Militarily, Russia's primary benefit from this cooperation is Iran's HESA Shahed 136 (or Geran-2) loitering munition, a one-way "kamikaze" drone. Iranian delivery of drones and drone instructors to Russia likely began in August 2022. Russia and Iran have since built a drone factory in the Russian Republic of Tatarstan.⁹ Russia's newfound mass-production capability facilitates swarm drone attacks in Ukraine. Russia frequently targets objectives that have a direct impact on civilians, such as energy infrastructure and population centers. Officially, Iran states that it provided drones to Russia before the latter's invasion of Ukraine and not since. However, Iran's military contributions are not limited to drones. In mid-September 2024, multiple sources reported that Iran had also supplied short-range ballistic missiles to Russia.¹⁰ Shortly after this reporting, there were reports of a massive Ukrainian drone strike within Russia that likely destroyed the missiles as well as other Russian munitions.¹¹ According to U.S. and European officials, launchers were not included in the missile shipment, possibly explaining why the missiles were stored and not employed.¹² Possible reasons for Iran not supplying launchers range from the tactical to the political, including continuing Iranian mistrust of Russia based on the two countries' tumultuous history. As with drones, Iran officially denies the shipment of any missiles to Russia.

Iran uses its proceeds from drone sales both domestically and to support its proxies in Gaza (Hamas), Lebanon (Hezbollah), and Yemen (the Houthis). This revenue is important to the economically challenged country, but what Iran truly wants from Russia is advanced combat technology. Iran already has the Russian S-300 air defense system, but its repeated requests that Russia provide the upgraded S-400 missile defense system and the Sukhoi Su-35 multirole fighter aircraft have gone unfulfilled. The Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force is largely comprised of Soviet-era fighters and Russian air defense systems that simply are not effective against the Israeli Air Force's Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II

multirole strike fighter aircraft. In fact, Israel's air attack on Iran on 26 October 2024 degraded or even destroyed Iran's remaining three S-300 systems.¹³ The S-400 and Su-35 would significantly increase Iran's territorial defense capabilities, particularly against potential Israeli strikes using F-35s.¹⁴ Ironically, Iran developed its drones in large part due to Russia's delay in providing either of these advanced systems.

If these two systems are off the table, what, then, is Russia willing to provide to Iran in return for its vital support in toppling Ukraine? Putin seems to be opting for military and scientific assistance that will not have an immediate effect on Iran's capability to threaten Israel. Russia launched Iranian satellites as part of Iran's Space Launch Vehicle (SLV) and missile programs.¹⁵ The SLV is of particular note since it may support Iran's development of nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missiles. There is also evidence dating back as far as 2022 that Iran has sought Russian assistance in acquiring nuclear material and with nuclear fuel fabrication. The fuel could serve nuclear power purposes but could also be used to expedite the creation of a nuclear weapon.¹⁶ Other areas of military cooperation include multiple cybersecurity agreements, military intelligence, and remote-sensing satellite capabilities. According to U.S. officials, the satellites may provide Iran with improved surveillance/targeting capability within the Middle East. Such military cooperation should be expected to continue and even expand based on completion of the pending Russian-Iranian strategic cooperation agreement. However, concrete details of this agreement and other military-related negotiations involving Russia tend to be vague with prolonged formalization.

Putin's aversion to selling Russia's advanced weaponry to Iran is likely due to the longstanding relationship he has with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Putin has openly referred to his "shared grief" with Netanyahu over the Soviet Jews killed by the Nazis during the Holocaust and of his concern for protecting Russian Jews living in Israel from attacks.¹⁷ The two leaders met within days of the expiration of a United Nations arms embargo on Iran in October 2020. Reading between the lines, it can be assumed that Netanyahu convinced Putin to refrain from providing Iran with the capability to better defend itself via the Su-35 and/or S-400 systems. But Putin also has another motive for not providing advanced weaponry to Iran. It is possible that any combat experience Israel gleaned while engaged with the Su-35 or S-400 may also be obtained by its close partner, the United States. Putin's provision of advanced weaponry to Iran may also result in Israel's military support for Ukraine, which is something Putin has warned Netanyahu against.

Economic Impact

Russia and Iran's economic cooperation since the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War is a means to offset Western sanctions and focuses on the energy market. Russia and Iran are globally ranked numbers one and two in gas reserves. Each country, however, has its own limitations on its global energy sales. Russia has been forced to replace its European oil revenues by selling its oil at a discount to Asian countries, a discount that Iran cannot compete with. Iran's oil exports are essentially limited to the People's Republic of China as part of their strategic partnership (less than one-third of Russia's oil is sold to China).¹⁸ Iran struggles with insufficient oil/gas infrastructure, which adversely affects its ability to take advantage of its ideal geographical position for energy distribution. To address this issue, in July 2022, the Russian gas company Gazprom and the National Iranian Oil Company signed a \$40 billion memorandum of understanding for the expansion of Iranian gas fields.¹⁹ Despite

Russia's willingness to assist Iran with its oil industry, Russia views Iran as energy market competition and therefore wants to maintain its influence with Iran to prevent normalization of its relations with Western countries.

The combination of Western sanctions and limited trade partners has prompted Russia and Iran to create new trade routes. One such route is the International North-South Transport Corridor. This 7,200-kilometer-long project, including ship, rail, and road, connects Azerbaijan, India, Iran, Central Asia, Russia, and Europe. Russia and Iran are investing as much as \$25 billion in the route, which includes dozens of infrastructure projects and may avoid sanctions and disruptive inspections.²⁰ Pilot runs of the route's segments were successfully conducted in 2022, and in June 2024, Russian state media reported that Putin had invited Pakistan to join the project.²¹

Another route of interest has not only economic but also military potential. The existing Volga-Don Canal route connects the Caspian Sea and the Sea of Azov, currently controlled by Russia.²² This route connecting the Volga and Don rivers in southern Russia was a Joseph Stalin-era initiative and is navigable with limitations due to water level and ice. Iran and China are helping Russia dredge the canal for increased use. There is evidence that Iran has shipped weaponry to Russia via the canal, reducing delivery time to Russia's stronghold in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine. There is little that the West can do to mitigate the facilitation of one sanctioned country delivering directly to another via the canal.

Putin Playing Both Sides

Russia's efforts to appease Israel reflect its intent to remain on good terms with all Middle Eastern nations while refraining from hegemonic aspirations. Putin consistently appears to support both sides of the Iran-Israel conflict while ensuring that Russia advances its goals of reclaiming great power status and external security. Russia's arms purchases from Iran indirectly fund Iranian proxies, while Russia selectively mitigates those same proxies' hostilities against Israel. Putin has publicly condemned the alleged Israeli drone strike on an Iranian drone factory in January 2023 but seems to tolerate Israeli strikes on IRGC sites in Syria. Russia provides military technology to Iran, but that technology is insufficient to stop precision strikes by Israel's F-35s. Putin values his relationship with Benjamin Netanyahu, yet he tolerates Iran and its proxies' decision to strike Israel. Putin's tolerance of Iranian attacks may have expanded to actual Russian assistance. Iran's large but ineffective attack on Israel in April 2024 mirrored Russian methods to penetrate NATO and U.S.-provided air defense systems in Ukraine, suggesting collaboration with Iran.²³ While Russia's prior knowledge of Israeli strikes into Iran is not clear, Russia likely had received alerts of Israeli strikes on Iranian proxies and auxiliary IRGC-commanded units in Syria via established deconfliction procedures. Furthermore, at the Valdai Discussion in July 2024, Putin condemned Hamas' 7 October 2023 attack on Israel but also supported Hamas' inclusion in peace negotiations and a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.²⁴ Further testing relations, the Israel Defense Forces recently discovered a Hezbollah cache, 60–70 percent of which was Russian weaponry, including some weapons with modern technology such as advanced antitank missiles. The volume and capability of the Russian weapons found in southern Lebanon by Israel exceeded even the country's own estimates.²⁵ Presently, it is not clear how or when Hezbollah came into possession of these weapons, but it has caused some in Israel to reassess its relations with Russia. Russia's contradictions in providing selective support to both Iran

and Israel reflect Putin's desperate attempt to maintain Russia's Middle Eastern relations, which only became endangered by Russia's miscalculations in the Russo-Ukrainian War.

The Russian military has been exposed as being less capable than expected, seemingly forced to depend on the sanctioned Iran's drones and Chinese and North Korean technology—and, in the case of the latter, personnel—to survive against Ukraine. Additionally, it was Iran that initiated Russia's involvement in Syria, facilitating its power projection into the Mediterranean. These factors may lead some to assume that Putin has chosen Iran over Israel, which will eventually force him to cut ties with Netanyahu. While this assessment has some merit, the trend of Putin's actions suggest that he will remain committed to maintaining good relations with both countries for as long as possible. He realizes that Russia needs Iranian weaponry, but, more importantly, he needs to ensure that Iran remains at odds with the West. A Western-influenced Iran would represent a perceived threat to Russia's periphery and upset Russia's essential oil sales.

Iran's recently diminished status bodes well for Putin recapturing the balance of Russian-Iranian relations. Iran is now clearly vulnerable in terms of domestic defense and economy. Iran's irrelevant April 2024 attack on Israel was likely the apex of its military capabilities.²⁶ Israel's successful strikes on Iranian air defense systems and other military targets will force Iran to turn to Russia for advanced defense technology, which Putin provides, but with limitations in capability. Conversely, Russia now relies less on Iran for its drones thanks to Iran's assistance in building a drone factory in Russia. Putin should be expected to exploit Iran's position by continuing to provide Iran with scientific assistance and defense capabilities, but they are limited in their capacity to pose a major threat to Israel. Reaction in Iran after the Israeli airstrikes on 26 October 2024 has included condemnation of Russia's unwillingness to stand with Iran and its refusal to send more sophisticated air-defense systems. Iran's standing is made worse by its limited options in energy market profitability, forcing it to again turn to Russia for assistance. Russia should be expected to assist Iran with its energy infrastructure, but not to the point of threatening Russia's recently recalibrated market. Both sides will need to reassess their relationship following the collapse of the al-Assad regime in Syria, which was the longest-running focal point of their cooperative relationship.

Russia's relations with Israel are not as transactional as those with Iran but are nonetheless valuable. Putin's relationship with Netanyahu has personal importance but also projects Moscow's global relevance to the Russian people. Putin's refusal to provide either the S-400 or Su-35 to Iran signals that he values maintaining Russia's relations with Israel long-term.

Conclusion: A Russian Win versus Loss

Russia's military deficiencies and political miscalculations have intrinsically connected the Middle East to the Russo-Ukrainian War. Regardless of the war's outcome, the Syrian opposition's quick and decisive overthrow of al-Assad may cause Iran to question Russia's continued value as a partner. A decisive Russian victory in Ukraine would allow it to strengthen its economic and military cooperation with Iran while it conducts postwar military reconstitution in Ukrainian territories it may continue to occupy. Future cooperation, however, is now in flux due to the developing situation in Syria, including reported negotiations for an agreement between Syria's new rulers and Russia that may allow Russian assets to remain in Syria.²⁷ Such an agreement would maintain Russia's power projection into the Mediterranean but would certainly be resented

by Iran. Russia may accept that risk, however, since its basing in Syria also facilitates its private military contractors and commercial interests in Africa. If Russia does win, it will focus on reconstituting its military and securing newly won Ukrainian territory, limiting its commitment to Syria.

If Russia loses in Ukraine, its objectives in both theaters would be abandoned, as the focus would be retaining the Russian state, with or without Putin. A loss would be catastrophic for Putin himself, as it would make manifest his greatest fear—a domino-effect democratization movement in Russia’s periphery, threatening his presidency through probable unrest in Russian society and oligarchal circles. Iran likely already considers Russia’s reliability and commitment as a partner as being contingent on its victory in Ukraine. As Russia’s slow, costly gains in Ukraine drag on, Iran should be expected to foster its strategic partnership with China. As for Iran’s leadership, it would have to choose a course to either retain a defeated Russia as its closest partner or reassess its differences with Israel and the United States.

ENDNOTES

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