

MERIA

IRAN AND RUSSIA: SIMILARITIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR DECISIONMAKING

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In light of the July 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1 powers, as well as Russian involvement in Syria, Russian-Iranian relations deserve special attention. This article argues that Russia and Iran have both common interests and cultural similarities that simultaneously foster their bilateral relationship and complicate these ties. This is also reflected in the foreign policies of both countries. Russia has been managing a "hybrid war" in Ukraine through pro-Russian separatists. Similarly, Iran relies on proxies in several Arab countries. Despite shared interests, Russia and Iran harbor suspicion towards each other, which has hindered the transformation of their bilateral ties into something more than ad hoc alliances.

The negotiations between the P5+1 powers and Iran, which concluded with the signing of an agreement on the Iranian nuclear program in July 2015, has brought the subject of Russia-Iranian relations into the limelight. Russia did not aid Iran in reaching the deal nor did it attempt to lift the Western-imposed sanctions. Still, since 2013, the dynamics of domestic politics in both Russia and Iran has brought these two countries closer to one another. This article argues that both shared interests and cultural similarities foster the relationship between the two while also complicating it.

It is common knowledge that Iran and Russia are "compelled friends yet pragmatic pals."¹ Russian-Iranian relations have never been smooth, as Russia, which had a colonial interest in Iran, is the only Christian power to have occupied part of Iran in modern history. The Russian Empire was thus encroaching upon Iran. Following the Communist revolution, there was still no improvement in relations. Today, however, by contrast, more and more voices in Russia are urging the country to turn to Iran. Among these are Alexander Dugin, Sergey Kurginyan, and other public intellectuals and opinionmakers who have stressed the importance of Iran. It is not fortuitous that those calling for closer ties with Iran are staunch proponents of "Eurasianism" and a "multi-polar world." The

latter two terms are nothing more than a euphemism for Russian hegemony over its "near abroad."

Iran indeed plays a role in Russian geostrategic calculus. First, Russia and Iran have common goals and strategy with regards to Syria and Afghanistan, though for different reasons. Second, Russia views Shi'i Iran as a counterbalance to the Sunni Muslim radicalism which is overtly hostile to Russia. In addition to these two strategic calculi, there exist some more nuanced motivations.

An analysis of Russian media, including social media, highlights the following image of Iran:

- Iran is a Muslim state, but it follows a highly respected, "civilized" form of Islam completely different from that of Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, Russia's out-and-out foe.
- Iran and Russia are partners in the war on terror.
- Iran is a conservative, traditionalist state that fights homosexuality. While it may sound ridiculous, for some Russian elites, Iran serves as a sort of alter ego in the sense that they project on Iran their dreams about how Russia should be. To some extent, it is similar to the "imagined Russia" of the French

radical Right: Some sympathizers of Le Front National imagine Putin as "a strong, wise leader who cares for his country and keeps traditions, hates America and homosexuals"-the leader we would like to have in France but it is impossible.

While Russia's domestic policy is far from being purely ideological or theological, the Russian Orthodox Church would like to wield more influence. The church, similar to the ayatollahs, opposes "Western liberalism." While the distinction between domestic "traditional" and foreign "Western values" does exist in the discourse of both countries,² the above image of Iran often contradicts pure geopolitical calculus, which leads Russia to act against its own interests. On the one hand, Russia backed the Western-imposed sanctions on Iran, but Russian diplomats later attempted to persuade the West to lift the sanctions. However, Russia in fact benefits from Iran's isolation, which prevents Iran from competing with Russia in the energy market. Moreover, as Russian businesses cannot compete with Western companies, the only possible opportunity to penetrate the Iranian market is under the sanctions, when there is no Western competition.

Several myths prevail among the Russian elites regarding Iran. The first is that Iran is developing its nuclear program not for the sake of nuclear weapons but as a security guarantee. The second myth is that Iran is Russia's potential ally.³ This notion is quite popular in Russia among experts, journalists, and bloggers. Iran is often depicted as Russia's natural ally, with shared interests and values and ready to counterbalance the American influence. This idea has gained even more traction since the crisis in Syria, in which the Russian and U.S. governments support opposing camps. Such support for Iran can be seen in Russian social media circles, for example, the "community group" on the Russian social network Vkontakte, "Iran is our main ally in the struggle with the United States."⁴

CULTURAL SIMILARITIES

There are also numerous cultural similarities between Iran and Russia. With regard to religion, Iranian attitudes are contradictory: On the one hand, Iranians are pious Muslims, and Shi'ism--as well as ancient Persian culture--is an integral part of Iranian identity. On the other hand, however, the religious establishment is viewed with suspicion and cynicism, as clerics are often perceived as corrupt. This attitude is very reminiscent of Russian attitude towards Orthodoxy, which is considered an important component of Russian identity though, at the same time, there is a disdain for the clerical establishment.

Russia, an heir of Byzantium, inherited Byzantine caesaropapism--combines the power of secular government with religious power. This is not far from the theology of the Iranian state, in which the religious establishment and the state are intertwined. Iran is completely subservient to its supreme leader, who is first and foremost a politician and not a real ayatollah. Khamene'i thus does not really possess religious credentials.

Both Iran and Russia view themselves as multiethnic empires with a dominant culture. An empire cannot afford to be explicitly ethnic or xenophobic, so it must strictly limit ethnic nationalism, Persian and Russian respectively. It is thus more correct to discuss "Iranian nationalism" as opposed to "Persian nationalism."

Many parallels exist between Russian and Iranian rhetoric. One can, for example, find similar motives in the speeches of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian Supreme Leader Khamene'i. Putin speaks extensively about sovereignty and self-sufficiency (*samodostatochnost*). Ali Khamene'i uses nearly the same terminology, *khodkefa'i*, which means that Iran must rely on its own potential.

Both leaders are pushing for the diversification of their countries' respective economies in order to decrease dependence on hydrocarbon export. Another key term in Khamene'i's speeches is *pishraft-e elmi ve-*

fanavari (scientific and technological progress).⁵ To this end, the Iranian leader has called for the establishment of an independent Iranian banking system and an emphasis on domestic production. Putin too has promoted such a system for Russian banks in his speeches. However, for both countries, corruption, bureaucracy, and inefficiency have hindered the implementation of these endeavors as well as further development of bilateral ties.

Government propaganda has been very successful in Russia, owing to the fact that the majority of Russians access information through print media and official Russian TV channels. Similarly, in Iran, while there are innumerable independent Persian-language media outlets in the virtual space, the population relies mainly on print news and government-run television.

Another area in which Russian and Iran are similar is hybrid warfare. The term evokes the new Russian *modus operandi* in Ukraine,⁶ namely covert military intervention whereby Russian special forces have been guiding and commanding the separatists--alongside Russian provocations and propaganda. As these operations are clandestine, Russia is thus able to avoid accusations of direct military occupation. It is considered hybrid warfare since it is neither a classical guerilla warfare nor an out-and-out war. The same is true for Iran in Iraq, where the Islamic Republic of Iran Army (IRI) follows a similar pattern: Iranian IRGC forces under the command of Qasem Suleimani jointly fight with Shi'i militias against the Sunni population--not exclusively against the Islamic State (IS). The result is ethnic cleansing of the Iraqi territory. Neither Russian nor Iranian media ever report about the massacres perpetrated by the Syrian regime or by the Shi'a against the Sunnis.

In an attempt to understand both Russian and Iranian motivations, one cannot ignore a particularly striking feature among both cultures: geopolitical interests are never concrete but rather are defined emotionally. Russian official pundits frequently bemoan a lack of respect toward Russia. Political scientist and head of the Council for Foreign

Defense Policy Sergey Karaganov speaks of Russia's humiliation, the failure to consider Russia's position, and "Russia rising from her knees."⁷ Iranian rhetoric very much resembles this: Iran must be respected; it is a regional power with its own legitimate interests.

Such an argument might initially seem logical. The United States and the UK, for example, have their spheres of influence, why shouldn't Russia and Iran? However, the United States and the UK have willing partnerships with other countries and not ones based on coercion.⁸ By contrast, all those countries in the Russian sphere of influence are eager to strengthen their ties with the United States and NATO. Moreover, geopolitical interests that are emotionally and not concretely defined are vague and are most often an attempt to conceal aggressive intentions. Anything the West does can be easily depicted as "humiliating" or "lacking respect."

Thus when Iran uses such rhetoric to describe its interests, the meaning is unclear. Does it mean that it should be allowed to control the neighboring Arab countries? Iran's influence in these countries is portrayed by Iranian media as relations of goodwill and friendship.⁹ However, unlike Russia, Iranian intellectuals rarely express interest in the Iranian regime's foreign policies.¹⁰

DOMESTIC SIMILARITIES

Russia and Iran are in some ways politically and economically alike as well. Both perceive themselves as regional superpowers, but they remain rentier states whose economies are based on oil and gas production. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and as of the writing of this article, there has been no serious effort to diversify the Russian economy. Due to Russian and Iranian reliance on oil, both their economies are heavily influenced by price fluctuations on the world energy market, and the value of the rial as well as the ruble is plummeting. Both Russian and Iranian efforts to curb this drop in currency have been futile.

The inefficiency of state-owned companies, corruption, and mismanagement are the bale of both Russia and Iran. In Russia's case, this is no surprise and is the result of Putin's policy on political nominations. In general, in authoritarian states, loyalty to the leader is the most valued quality, and Russia is no exception. Putin's political appointments, including Igor Sechin, Yuri Kovalchuk, Arkady Rotenberg, and Nikolay Patrushev--mostly former KGB officers--lack the credentials and qualifications for their political posts and were appointed solely due to their loyalty to the Russian leader.

In a speech delivered in December 2014, Putin showed that one should not expect rational economic decisionmaking from the Russian leader. This assumption is corroborated by the fact that Putin, who is the ultimate decisionmaker, listens to his chosen gate keepers, such as politician Sergey Glazyev, whose statements reveal he is as unprofessional as Putin himself. In terms of economic calculi, Russian decisionmaking is simply irrational. Even if there are skilled specialists, their recommendations are not binding and are always subservient to Putin's will. Thus one cannot expect rational economic decisions.

Since 2006, the Kremlin has employed the Ketchum PR firm, spending millions of dollars in order to "soften" its image abroad.¹¹ Still, the Russian administration never heeded to firm's advice, namely with regard to how to behave with journalists. By the same token, the Kremlin does not coordinate its policies with the think tanks; rather it imposes on them the "right answers" or the said institutions deliver research on demand. Such policy analysis papers focus more describing a situation than on analysis and conclusions.¹²

This pattern of behavior is in line with the Soviet intelligence assessment methodology, which always suffered from analytical setbacks and did not supply objective analysis. The Soviet intelligence community lacked strong analytical departments, as its role was confined to ensuring the party line.¹³ Similarly, today, the Kremlin's worldview is imbued with conspiracies, and its

understanding of the world is very limited.¹⁴ Russian decisionmaking is irrational and unrelated to concrete geopolitical and economic interests.

A similar pattern prevails in Iran. Any objective understanding of the processes unfolding in foreign states produced by analysts may well be ignored by Khamene'i, who most certainly does not heed to their advice. This notwithstanding, Iranian hardliners are arguing that their political course is right because it really strengthens Iran: Iran now influences four Arab capitals--Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad, and San'a.

IRANIAN PERCEPTIONS OF RUSSIA

Interestingly, what Russia views as a proof of Russian assistance to Iran, some Iranian officials consider as anti-Iranian measures. For instance, with regard to the Bushehr nuclear plant, Iran was displeased with Russian procrastination of the project. Khatami's former ambassador to France, Sadeq Kharrazi, argued that Russia was a foe in the guise of a friend.¹⁵ He added, "Iran suffered from Russia what she never suffered from America." Kharrazi argued that the "circumstances between Iran and Russia are such that a strategic alliance between the two will be never possible."¹⁶ Though the official Iran stresses the importance of ties with Russia, it is far from considering it as a strategic ally. Overall, Iran has no illusions about Russia's motives, and it is fully aware that Russia is in pursuit of its own goals. However, Iran is aware of the fact that it has no other ally or alternative.

In an interview with the Majlis research center, Iranian Ambassador to Russia Mehdi Sanai explained the key principles of Russian policy vis-à-vis Iran.¹⁷ On the whole, his speech is in line with the official propaganda, but it also reveals Iran's true view of Russia. For instance, he alluded to the fact that many of Russia's supposed joint development projects with Iran existed only on paper. Sanai also underscored the *potential* for bilateral ties, while also stressing that the economic

benefits of such cooperation were significantly lower than initially expected.

To summarize, the notion that Russia will forge a long-term strategic alliance with Iran in order to expand its influence in the Middle East is exaggerated, if not misleading. In addition to Syria, there are a number of areas where the interests of the two states overlap, such as their disdain for the future Taliban regime in Afghanistan and their inherent suspicion of U.S., Turkish, and Pakistani ambitions in the former Soviet Union. Nonetheless, in some important areas, Russian and Iranian objectives are essentially in competition--including, for example, over the division of the Caspian Sea and control and routing of oil pipelines through their respective territories prior to reaching global markets.

The widely reported "oil for goods" swap between Iran and Russia thus cannot be executed because of the above obstacles. Russia simply does not manufacture any goods that could interest Iran. In addition, neither Iran nor Russia have sufficient infrastructure to deal with such quantities of oil. Therefore, it appears that more than a contract, this is political bluffing in order to beef up Russia's image as a superpower with independent policies. At the same time, the Iranian media has been very skeptical about the prospects of any such deal.¹⁸ As of the writing of this article, it is barely mentioned in either Russia or Iran.

The only real channel through which Russia is able to enhance its influence in Iran is through the supply of weapons and the continuation of its stance on Syria. Russia's economic crisis has imposed limitations on the Russian military industry. Prior to the crisis, the industry had a huge currency reserve and was thus able to be selective with its clients. Yet due to current liquidity deficit, it is eager to sell and as a result can hardly afford any delays in delivery. It is thus likely Russia will make more weapons deals with Iran.

It is too early to predict the future of Russian-Iranian relations in light of the Russia intervention in Syria, as many variables are at play. However, some things are clear. Iranian

officials welcomed the Russian airstrikes in Syria, though one should bear in mind that if Tehran wishes to rescue Assad from collapse, it simply has no other option save cooperation with Moscow. On October 8, 2015, several Russian cruise missiles launched from the Caspian Sea targeting Syrian rebels reportedly fell on Iranian soil, leading to much confusion in Tehran. Though both leading Iranian news agencies and witnesses in the country reported the event, Iranian officials denied this.¹⁹ It is possible that in the future, Russian and Iranian interests in Syria may diverge. Nonetheless, Russia already has more say on Syria's future than Iran. For instance, Russia is now attempting to gain support for its intervention from the Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). During his meeting with the Saudi and UAE envoys, Putin announced that he "understood" Saudi concerns regarding Syria. Meanwhile, the *al-Arab* newspaper (based in London) reported the meeting as Russia's readiness to stop the Iranian influence in Syria.²⁰

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NOTES

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