

President Raisi in Russia: Deepening Iran's Turn Eastward

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President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Moscow reflects a strategic decision by the Iranian regime to strengthen ties with the East, at the expense of the trend of openness to the West led by President Hassan Rouhani. This reversal is a point of contention between the political currents in Iran. However, with the support of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the leading interests will continue to be an alternative to ties with the West, military strengthening, and political support in international institutions. Israel must take into account that for Moscow, the "Iranian card" has recently gained increasing importance, in part in the context of tensions with the United States due to the Ukraine crisis, and may also be played contrary to Israel's interests.

On January 19, 2022, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Moscow to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin. This was Raisi's first official visit since his election as president in June 2021, and a first such visit since Rouhani visited in March 2017. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov tweeted at the end of the meetings that the two countries had drafted a framework agreement for long-term cooperation, and the Iranian foreign minister stated that the presidents had instructed the experts to formulate a plan for a twenty-year strategic cooperation agreement.

The new agreement is intended to replace the previous cooperation agreement, signed for the first time in 2001 by President Mohammad Khatami and extended several times since then, until it expired in 2020. Iran, under Rouhani, was in no hurry to sign anew, arguing that its contents should be updated. Following Raisi's visit, it was reported that Tehran and Moscow reached an agreement as a first step to increase their trade level from the current volume of \$4 billion to about \$10 billion. Russia has also agreed to provide Iran with \$5 billion in credit lines. It was likewise reported that various customs restrictions were lifted, which had previously prevented the export of Iranian products to Russia. Iran's Atomic Energy Organization said Iran and Russia were negotiating the construction of more new units at the Bushehr nuclear reactor.

There were also rumors of agreements in the military field. These were apparently discussed during a visit to Moscow in October 2021 by Iran's Chief of the Armed Forces, Mohammad Bakri, who met with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to discuss the purchase of Russian weapons. On the agenda is Iran's desire to refresh its outdated air force and purchase SU25 fighter jets, fighter helicopters, and training aircraft, and according to American estimates, also S-400 air defense systems. At this stage, no realization of any arms deal is known. However, two days after the visit, several exercises were held in the northern Indian Ocean, with the participation of Russia, Iran, and China.

Raisi's choice to hold his first formal presidential visit in Moscow is no accident and reflects the heightening trend of the regime in Tehran to strengthen ties with Russia and China; the trend is led by Supreme Leader Khamenei and executed by Raisi. This approach contrasts with the policy of the Rouhani government, which in its first term led to the formulation of the nuclear agreement and the removal of sanctions (2015) as a preferred solution to Iran's economic difficulty, and toward the end of its term made its preference clear to resume nuclear talks in Vienna with the Biden administration. In an interview ahead of Raisi's visit, Iran's ambassador to Russia explicitly said that the Rouhani government saw the West as the leading international force and paid too little attention to the East, while the Raisi government, which is much closer to the Supreme Leader, advocates tightening and strengthening relations with the East.

This policy continues to be a bone of contention in Iran; sources in the conservative camp presented the visit as historic and important, while politicians in the more moderate camp criticized the tightening of ties with Russia. Former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad stated that the agreement would be valid only if brought to the Majlis for approval, and the director of a reformist newspaper went so far as to describe Iran as a "colony" of China and Russia.

This issue was examined by the Majlis Research Center, which published a detailed report in September 2021 on the implications of long-term strategic cooperation with Russia. The document stated that the cooperation between the countries in Syria created a positive turn in their relations, and their close positions in relation to the world order and the international system form the basis of the strategic cooperation. Among the main conclusions of the report: a cooperation agreement will challenge Western policy, reduce the impact of US sanctions on Russia and Iran alike, and strengthen their achievements in Syria. The report also points to factors that may delay progress in bilateral relations, including relations between Israel and Russia and economic relations between Russia and other countries in the region (e.g., the Gulf states). This joins the need to change the views of Russia's decision makers on Iran's seriousness and determination on the one hand, and the views of sections of the Iranian public that treat Russia with historical distrust and suspicion, accusing it of breaching promises to Tehran and supporting Security Council sanctions against Iran on the other. All of this is accompanied by the fear that any long-term agreement would harm Iran's independence and be in Russia's interests at the expense of those of Iran.

To preempt an attack and respond to the expected criticisms, Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior adviser to the Supreme Leader, gave an interview to the *Kayhan* newspaper prior to Raisi's visit to Moscow, in which he emphasized equality between Russia and Iran, their mutual rights, and non-interference in internal affairs. He underscored their shared worldview and Russia's assistance to Iran within the framework of the Security Council. Moreover, the Iranian regime explained Russia's negative image of Iran as rooted in the Western perception within Iran. The Iranian ambassador to Moscow claimed that Western propaganda was very effective, and that the Western media was what instilled the negative image of Russia in the Iranians. Thus, the Iranian government "will actively work to filter information about Russia's image in Iran and will not allow for the same negative atmosphere as in the past."

The strategic decision by the Iranian regime to strengthen relations significantly with Russia as well as with China – as reflected in both Raisi's visit to Moscow and the agreement signed with Beijing – clearly reflects a departure from Iran's policy under Rouhani. This decision is independent of whether the talks in Vienna will mature into a return to the nuclear agreement. Experience following the original nuclear deal, the JCPOA, has shown Iran that it will not gain economic salvation from Europe and that European businesses will not rush to invest in it – even if US sanctions are lifted following an agreement reached in Vienna. Russia, for its part, and especially during this period of tension with Washington and NATO over Ukraine, sees the Iranian card as an achievement that can be played against the United States. Iran is also aware of Russia's broad considerations, some of which are inconsistent with those of Iran, chief among them Moscow's continued interest in maintaining dialogue and cooperation channels with Washington and in the future even strengthening them. In addition, Iran's dissatisfaction with Russia's policy in Syria continues, which allows Israel to continue its attacks, promotes economic interests at the expense of Iran, and cooperates with Turkey, sometimes bypassing Iran.

Iran-Russia relations must be seen through an informed, long-term prism. The two countries have many common interests, most notably opposition to US influence in the Middle East. The cooperation between them was perceived by the Supreme Leader himself and the conservative camp as necessary in view of the inability of the regime, especially economically, to promote the slogan "neither East nor West," coined by Khomeini. Thus, alongside the continuation of disagreements on a range of issues, the leading direction will be the preservation and strengthening of relations between Iran and Russia in the political, economic, and security spheres.

Israel, for its part, must consider Russia's interests, both vis-à-vis Iran and vis-à-vis Washington, within the changing international circumstances, and take into account that at some point the Iranian card may be played in ways that directly harm Israeli interests. This is both in the context of freedom of action in Syria (joint flights with the Syrian Air Force?) as well as in political statements contrary to the Israeli interest. In an extreme scenario, there

may even be an interest in increasing tensions in the Syrian arena as a means of Russian pressure on the West over the Ukrainian issue. In the context of the Vienna talks, Russia claims to support the return of Washington and Tehran to the nuclear deal but reiterates that it was the Trump administration that violated it, and it supports Iran's demand for a clear US commitment to the agreement and a commitment that no future US administration withdraw from it.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen