

Deepening Cooperation between Iran and Russia

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Economic and political isolation has pushed Russia and Iran to strengthen the cooperation between them. The closer relationship between these countries has both military and economic dimensions and is reflected in their new level of cooperation in the war in Syria, which reached new heights in recent months with Iran's decision to support Russia in its war in Ukraine. Iran has sold Russia many hundreds of drones – reflecting cooperation of the highest order – and Russia's use of these weapons have already caused enormous damage to Ukrainian infrastructures. Israel must consider what Russia might give Iran in return – in the conventional military sphere (aircraft and air defense); regarding its status in Syria; and a possible blind eye to the leakage of nuclear knowledge and components to Tehran.

The long relationship between Iran and Russia, reflected inter alia by the tight military cooperation between them in the war in Syria, took a leap forward with Tehran's decision to support Moscow in its war against Ukraine. Notable is Iran's supply of drones, including suicide drones, and operational training. Russia's need for Iranian aid after many months of fighting in Ukraine, particularly all aspects of precision attack capabilities, led to the supply of about 1700 drones, some only recently. According to US sources, a small delegation of Iranian military personnel arrived in the Crimean Peninsula two months ago to train the Russian military in the use of the drones and to improve their performance in view of experience gained on the ground. In November, Ukraine even reported that Iranian military personnel had been killed in a Ukrainian attack on Crimea. The Iranian drones helped Russia launch deadly attacks on Kyiv and Zaporizhzhia, including infrastructure facilities. Short and medium range

missiles will apparently be supplied in the future, along with assistance in building a drone factory in Russia, a possibility that has been discussed between Moscow and Tehran. Such a move will significantly increase Russia's arsenal, even if it takes time.

In addition, in early December, Britain reported that Russia was interested in renewing its stock of ballistic missiles, and had held talks with Iran on the transfer to Russia of several hundred Iranian missiles with ranges of 300 and 700 km. However, diplomatic pressure on Iran following these reports has so far prevented the transfer of these missiles. At the same time, Russia has reportedly begun to train Iranian pilots to fly Sukhoi Su-35 fighter planes, and it is possible that it will sell these aircraft to Iran in the near future (an Egyptian order that was stopped under American pressure), which would strengthen the Iranian air force significantly. There have also been reports of talks on the supply of air defense systems (Iran already has S-300 systems in place) and helicopters. It was likewise reported that Tehran and Moscow are considering cooperation in the naval realm, with the purchase of existing Russian warships and help in designing ships tailored specifically to Iranian needs. Following these reports, American officials described the relations between the two nations as transforming into "a full-fledged defense partnership."

Following the considerable reduction in its trade with Europe, Russia has turning eastward, and in this context, likewise to Iran. For its part, Iran, which is also subject to Western sanctions, is interested in increasing its economic cooperation with Russia. One reflection of the deepening cooperation is the plan for accelerated construction of the 3000 km commercial route, planned to extend from the western part of Russia through Iran to India. This route is intended to be less sensitive to Western sanctions and monitoring, and Russia aims to use this route to link the Volga River with the Sea of Azov, which is very important for the war with Ukraine. In addition, numerous delegations have traveled between Iran and Russia with the aim of expanding and strengthening trade between the countries, which according to official Russian (albeit exaggerated) estimates could reach \$40 billion dollars when a free trade agreement is signed.

In parallel with bilateral understandings in the economic and military fields, according to the Iranian deputy foreign minister, there are also signs of cooperation and understandings in the Syrian arena, together with progress on cooperation in the Caucasian region and particularly in Afghanistan, considered by Russia and Iran as a common security issue.

Another area marked by growing rapprochement between Iran and Russia is energy. Russia and Iran own the two largest gas reserves in the world, and they have signed a memorandum of understanding whereby Russia will invest \$40 billion in Iranian gas projects, although it is unlikely that deals of this size will be realized. Russia has previously avoided similar investments for fear of Western sanctions, but the imposition of sanctions on Russia due to the war in Ukraine has changed its set of considerations. At the same time, the disruption of the supply of Russian gas to Europe following the invasion of Ukraine will apparently not lead to a significant increase in the supply of Iranian gas to Europe: the available infrastructure is insufficient, there is a shortage of gas liquefaction for domestic Iranian consumption, and the sanctions on Iran as well as Russia limits the potential. Moreover, alongside the wish to cooperate on energy, tension may emerge between Russia and Iran, partly because of Russia's attempt to increase its influence in the sphere of gas in Iran; the possible Iranian difficulty of meeting Russia's prices; and competition between the two countries for the Turkish market. In this context, figures published in December by the deputy head of the Russian Federal Customs Service show that exports to Iran have grown by 27 percent and imports by only 10 percent. It appears that it is easier for Russia to enter the Iranian market than for Iran to enter the Russian market.

The growing closeness to Russia, which follows an Iranian strategic decision to turn eastward, announced by President Ebrahim Raisi at the start of his term of office, has revived the debate in Iran about the nature of relations. In the Iranian mindset, Russia revives bad memories from as far back as the days of the czar, and even more so from the days of the Soviet Union, which during the Second World War captured northern Iran and ruled the area

for about five years. For example, Hossein Alaei, the former commander of the Revolutionary Guards Navy, believed that Russia in effect dragged Iran into war and thus ensured that it would not return to the nuclear deal, and thereby reinforced Russian influence on Iran's foreign policy. This conclusion was shared by Mahmoud Shouri, a researcher at the Iranian research institute IRAS, who argued that any step that distances Iran from the West strengthens Russia and China. In his opinion, it would be a mistake to think that Iran's arms sales to Russia are evidence of Iran's growing power, and that Iran must take care that such moves do not create a new and problematic international situation whose cost exceeds its benefit and will be impossible to escape. Prof. Abdolreza Faraji-Rad, former Director General of the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations in Iran, added that just as China has recently changed its policy to Iran's disadvantage (in the case of the Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunb Islands), so Iran must prepare for the possibility that Russia, in spite of its current closeness to Iran, might turn to the West in an attempt to reach a ceasefire agreement in Ukraine, and this would necessarily be at the expense of its ties with Iran. The newspaper *Jomhuri e-Eslami* (جمهوری اسلامی) argues that Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the pretext that Ukraine was formerly part of Russia should sound an alarm for its future relations with Iran. After all, Iran itself was for many years under the influence of czarist and Soviet Russia, and parts of the country were under Russian and Soviet physical control.

Yet reservations notwithstanding, Iran expects suitable recompense for its strategic decision to stand by Russia at both military and economic levels. Iran likewise estimates that in the emerging new global order it will have an enhanced position based on its tighter links to Russia (and China). For Israel, this creates a new and very worrisome situation, given the possibility that Russia will reward Iran with conventional weapons; cooperation in the Syrian space; and nuclear elements – although the assessment is that there has been no change in Russia's position that it has no interest in a nuclear Iran. Iran and Russia have cooperated for many years on civilian nuclear matters, starting with the construction of the nuclear power plant in Bushehr by Russia, which is now advancing another two units, including Iranian use of Russian expertise to build the research reactor in Arak. The

continuation of the engagement between Iran and the Russian nuclear infrastructure could lead to leaks to the military nuclear program due to weak oversight by the Russian authorities on the limits of Iranian activity. Inter alia, aid could be given for renewal of the operation of the Arak reactor, which was halted in the framework of the nuclear deal. It is also possible that Iran will seek cooperation in the field of nuclear-powered submarines – a possibility raised by Iran in recent years, albeit in general terms, as a way of enriching uranium to a military level.

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